

BODIES OF KNOWLEDGE: MADNESS AND POWER  
IN AFRICANA WOMEN'S TEXTS

By  
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by

Chandra Tyler Mountain

To my mom, Yvonne Williams Tyler, who daily lives the madness that consumes black women's lives and handles it with grace.

To the memory of my grandmothers, Theresa Denise Williams and Irma Gray Tyler, and my paternal aunts, Gaynell Tyler Brewer and Joycelyn Tyler Douglas

To all those women who chose freedom in a watery grave that stretches from Africa to the New World rather than suffer the indignity and madness of physical, mental, and spiritual bondage

All beautiful women whose blood and spirit course through my veins

It is for you, strong but silent women, that I put pen to page

For Mother Africa

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Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School  
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This dissertation focuses on the representation of madness in the writings of women of Africa and the African Diaspora, more specifically the United States, the Caribbean Islands, and sub-Saharan Africa. It seeks to engage madness as a social text in African women's texts and cultures. While many critics have devoted attention to a Western construction of madness and madness in the literary texts of European and Euro-American women, there has been minimal attention to the same theme in Africana women's texts. It is the argument of this project that, in the texts contemplated, madness is often represented as an act of resistance and empowerment. This has tended to

be a troubling concept for many Western thinkers since insanity is perceived as weakness and a result of loss of control; yet out of the novels of Africana women arises a theory of madness as empowering that speaks across cultures and waters. The project is divided into five chapters, which illuminate representations, manifestations, and activities of madness and "mad" characters, in the literature of Africana women.

The texts this project explores include Erna Brodber's *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*; Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*; Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*; Myriam Warner-Vieyra's *Juletane*; Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*; Gayl Jones' *Eva's Man*; Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*; Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy*; and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. Some attention is given to Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*; Tess Onwueme's *Tell It to Women*; Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy*; Audre Lorde's poem "Power"; and Grace Nichols' poem "Days That Fell."

## INTRODUCTION

A few years ago, I attended a conference at which a young woman from Miami University-Oxford did what many thought an excellent Freudian reading of Terry McMillan's novel and the subsequent movie, *Waiting to Exhale*. In response to her reading, the moderator who continually stepped over the lines basically told her that she was giving McMillan too much credit, that she "ain't that deep." The "moderator from hell," as a few of us began to call her, was struggling with a couple of issues: one, which seems deeply imbedded in her statement, is that we cannot use Freud for Africana experiences, that folk culture or "real Black culture" has no use for Freud; and two, everyday problems for Black women should not be taken seriously nor should the "everyday" literature we read, especially novels that make us laugh, nod our heads in agreement, and say, "humph." What the moderator missed was that the young woman was actually doing a Freudian reading of the public's response to the novel and movie. And while McMillan might not be "that deep" to some (because she simply talks about the facts of life for many women?), the

responses to her movie told something of the psychological makeup of Africana women here in America--no matter what the response, even in the refusal to see the movie, or the denial that the movie is a male-bashing movie. Each of the women touched on something within us, something that we would rather keep out of psychological reach.

However, the "moderator from hell" did touch upon crucial issues in Black women's experience. She, first of all, contributed to the huge number of women, Black women in particular, who have accepted that the things Black women go through and the responses we have to whatever life deals us--whether a result of racism, sexism, political crisis, motherhood, wifehood, familial relations--are "just life" and should not affect us on any level beyond that. But when we witness the crude breakup of Bernadine's marriage, and learn that her 11-year husband plans a breakup for years by "hiding" money and property before finally admitting his adultery with a white woman, and when we watch the woman who has "made the man" burn some of the man's belongings in his BMW, hold a "Love Hangover" rummage sale with the rest of his belongings and sell his golf clubs and other effects for no more than a dollar, we are not watching a woman just deal with "life." Divorce might become typical for half of the nation's married women (and



men), but Bernadine's response is not typical—for white women or for Black women. It is this tendency to assume Black women's issues, problems, and life situations are not "that deep" that has begun to disturb me beyond measure. That we are not worthy of serious attention because many of us have been coping well with life's blows contributes to the myths circulating about us: the constant comparison of strong Black supermama "bitches" to fragile white women who must be sheltered and protected denies our humanity and our struggles presently as well as historically.

Secondly, the moderator's recognition of the risks involved in Western psychological and psychiatric theories to outline or analyze Black women's experiences was enlightened. It was problematic that the woman used Freud to analyze a Black woman's texts and Black women's responses to it. This is not so because McMillan "ain't that deep" but because psychoanalysis is a field set up to analyze experiences from a Eurocentric point-of-view, and very few of the models and tools used in psychoanalytic interpretations of reality have anything to do with the peculiar situations and impositions of Black women. One of the intriguing things about Bernadine's character is that she went there for a while—she went crazy and forgot everything that mattered momentarily, but she used her

temporary madness, if you will, to get her act together, to empower herself, and to take on the battle ahead with the man who walked out on her and her children. Some people find the idea problematic: When I say Bernadine stepped out of her normal self for a moment and empowered herself, most will agree, but when I state that she empowered herself by entering the realm of the mad, even if for a moment, I run into conflict.

I mention this experience with McMillan's text to introduce my topic: madness as a social text in Africana women's writings. This topic imperceptibly germinated several years ago with a rebellion that took place only in my mind. *Jane Eyre*. The screeching, uncontrollable madwoman imprisoned in Rochester's attic troubled me. I resented that my first cognizant encounter with "third world" madness had come by the hands of a nineteenth century white woman writer from England, and, moreover, that this woman gave her no dimensions. She is simply mad, always at the periphery of the novel, and one day she jumps off the roof of Thornfield Hall. But I was both repulsed and intrigued. Repulsed that this creature was designed to be *Jane Eyre's* other in every way imaginable, including racially and sexually. The racial otherness of this woman, Edward Rochester's wife from the Caribbean, stunned me.

After all, why isn't she British by *nationality* as well as descent? Would the effect have been less drastic if she had hailed from jolly ol' England? Would it have been proper to lock an English woman in the attic? Was it necessary to so create this character so that a "moral, Protestant femininity, licensed sexuality, and a qualified, socialized feminism may survive" in the equally rebellious Jane Eyre as some critics suggest (Kaplan 874)? What did (and continues to) intrigue me about Bertha is the decidedness of her acts of empowerment. While others who read the novel generally sympathize with Jane or Rochester, my sympathies are with the woman whose final act of empowerment was probably also her first. But the problem with the text is I do not know why this is so: while Bronte introduces the subject of madness, she gives us no indication as to why Bertha is confined; she leaves us with the simple assumption that there is no explanation for Bertha's madness other than genetics and race, which would very much be aligned with Victorian perceptions of other races as is evidenced in St. John's, another character's, missionary works in the novel.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It is during the Victorian age that the scramble for Africa takes place and racist notions about evolutionary chains and saving the savages were at their peak. Although Bertha is "not Black," it is seemingly Bronte's intention to create a character so far removed from Jane Eyre and so far removed from England, propriety, and "humanity"

Two texts that I read much later began to give shape to my rebellion and make it more constructive: Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Derek Walcott's *Dream on Monkey Mountain*. *Wide Sargasso Sea* fills in details of Bertha's story that Bronte neglects. Rhys gives Bertha a new name, Antoinette, a history—even a race. Though she traces a family history of madness, she reveals some of the familial, societal, and marital tensions that really push Antoinette over the edge. Rhys raises questions about the white West Indian's (non)place in history and culture and begins to hint at some of the internal conflicts of Post-Emancipation Jamaica that concretize Antoinette's upbringing, experiences and her eventual madness. Derek Walcott's *Dream on Monkey Mountain* adds even more clarity to the picture because he employs the paradoxes of the colonial subject position and life in a French colony to explore "madness." Here he produces a collage of various personality types and their responses to their own colonial crises. Through Felix Hobain, a drunk, disillusioned colonial subject, transformed into the mad Makak, specifically, Walcott outlines the varied forces up against which the average-peasant class-individual must contend:

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that what comes out is a symbolic racial other—not someone who is necessarily Black but someone who stands in where a Black person cannot, and can appeal to all of the myths and stereotypes surrounding Blackness, including Black womanness.

poverty, inferiority complex, oppression from many sides, taunting, and the "rage for whiteness" that drives "niggers mad." In so doing, he defines madness as a creation of the colonial and (post)colonial subject position.

These three texts, while not explicitly a part of this project, gave me the impetus to write about the madness of Africana women as defined and described in their texts. Texts by and about them. Few theorists and critics have come forward to address in an extensive study the madness evident in (post)colonized texts, but even fewer have ventured into the psychological realm of oppressed third world women characters. There have been many extensive studies of white women's "madness" and madness in the fiction of white women writers; these studies have given little if any attention to Africana women. Furthermore, the experiences of white women and Black women are often so divergent that their experiences with madness have little commonality. Although madness is a central issue in many Africana women's texts there have been no sustained studies on madness in the texts. Part of the reason is that madness is a part of life and reality for Black women, so the community subsumes the madwoman and writers who write on Black women's texts include madness in their general discussions. My focus will be primarily on African and

Diaspora women writers' novels and the particular madnesses they express—where they connect, where they diverge, where they speak to each other—more importantly, what they say about the reality of Africana women.

I use the word "Africana" because it, like the word "Black," embraces all women of Black Africa and the African Diaspora. While I interchange the two words, I prefer the term "Africana" because of its pointing to our place of origin and departure. Not only does it connect us geographically through Africa, but psychologically, socially, and spiritually as well. Women of Africa and the Diaspora—Africana women—are linked through our African heritage, through our common experiences in economic exploitation and marginalization, through negative literary images, through the shared value of self-reliance as a necessary ideology, through the creation of survival imperatives, through formation of a less antagonist feminism, an African brand of feminism, through our experiences with race, gender, and class oppression (Steady 7-42).

The next five chapters focus on the madness(es) in Africana women's texts, more specifically in Black women writers from various parts of Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States of America. Chapter 1, "Bodies of

Knowledge: Madness and Power in Africana Women's Texts," outlines definitions and theories of madness and gives an overview of points that will be illuminated in later chapters. Chapter 2, "Dead End Street: Reading the Signs, Hitting the Wall, and Speaking Madness," discusses anger as a "microcosm of [Africana women's] madness," as a response to the madness of the world that oppresses Africana women and leads them to write mad characters. Chapter 3, 'Go Eena Kumbula': Madness as Alternative Survival Strategy," examines madness in terms of the kumbula metaphor; it focuses on Erna Brodber's (Jamaica) *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*, Bessie Head's (South Africa, Botswana) *A Question of Power*, and Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (United States). Chapter 4, "Mad Acts and Body Parts: Saving the B/body That Is Her Own," uses Myriam Warner-Vieyra's *Juletane* (Guadeloupe, Senegal), Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (United States), and Gayl Jones' *Eva's Man* (United States) to explore the body as the terrain of madness. Lastly, Chapter 5, "Tug-o-War: Madness and Assimilation" studies madness as the consequence of the opposite pull of tradition and assimilation as exemplified in Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy* (Antigua), Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (United States), and Tsitsi Dangarembga's (Zimbabwe) *Nervous Condition*.

Where possible, each chapter centers on a text from three major areas, African America, Africa, and the Caribbean. In one instance, I focused on an African character (Tashi) imagined by an African American author (Alice Walker) because many African women see themselves in the character Walker created. The authors are from various locales, but they meet at the table to discuss the maddening conditions of being an African woman.



CHAPTER 1  
BODIES OF KNOWLEDGE:  
MADNESS AND POWER IN AFRICANA WOMEN'S TEXTS

Madness is a powerful and empowering force in the novels of Africana women across the Diaspora: sometimes, as the last victorious attempt toward self-possession; as a spirit overtaking and guiding the life; as a protector for the mind and body and soul of the dispossessed, sexually oppressed and repressed, and the self-deprecating; and as the consequence of individuals in war-torn, colonial-ravished spaces feeling the pull between traditional values and Western values. Western psychology offers many terms for madness—mental illness, psychosis, neurosis, mania, dementia, and insanity<sup>1</sup>—each with its own particular definition or debate surrounding it. This work explores madness in Africana women's texts, seeks to define it and

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<sup>1</sup> These terms are defined as follows: Psychosis, a severe psychological disorder characterized by such a degree of distortion of reality that the victim finds it hard to care for herself; neurosis, a psychological disorder characterized by anxiety or inconvenient behavior designed to defend the person against experiencing insanity; mania, a psychological state characterized by elevated mood or a high feeling and hyperactivity; dementia, deteriorating of mental functioning; insanity—mental derangement, ranging from subtle, temporary, and unarmful derangement to overt and dangerous.

advance a theoretical position on madness as a social text. Terms and attitudes toward mental illness (etc.) change frequently, e.g. the DSM-IV's removal of the term neurosis, so I choose to use the catchall term "madness" in this project. My choice of the word madness, rather than the two general terms insanity and mental illness is no accident. I see mental illnesses as *manifestations* of madness, and insanity, though once again a form of madness, connotes too extreme a madness to use as a general term. By using the word madness, I emphasize the function (social and psychological) and experience of madness rather than simply the individual classifications, so that it is a minor detail if an individual character is schizophrenic, severely depressed, angry, delusional, or not even crazy at all from a clinical perspective. What matters is her experience of and with what she experiences as madness—what causes it and how it functions. Though I use the terms mental illness (and specific forms of mental illness) and insanity throughout the project sometimes to refer to specific types of madnnesses, I recognize that madness is "more than a set of symptoms, [and more than] a diagnostic category" (Ussher 11). The word madness is appropriate because it also embraces the lay definitions: crazy, out of her mind, out of control, nervous condition, and bad

nerves. So that when a woman steps outside what her community deems as acceptable behavior (even if she is not clinically mad or universally mad) or when anger leads her to do things she would not ordinarily do, she is also mad or maddened by oppression. Madness as an experience is caused by the experience of oppression and it is indeed a counter-experience born out of resistance. Furthermore, there are questions about who defines madness and the vantage point from which he or she does so and the claim that madness is one point on a continuum between sanity and insanity that must be considered.

Though many theories of madness abound, psychologists use different models to provide an understanding or explanation of the underlying mechanisms that may be contributing to a mental disorder. The models help us to understand that abnormal behavior may be the result of many different factors. The typical models or combination of models a psychologist or psychiatrist may use, depending on his or her training include:

1. The medical model which assumes that the underlying cause, or etiology, of a mental disorder is a biological dysfunction. The medical model views abnormal behaviors as analogous to physical illness and as symptoms of an underlying disease.
2. In the learning model, abnormal behaviors are acquired in the same way as normal behaviors, that is, they are learned through the processes of classical conditioning, operant conditioning, and

social learning. In this model, the behaviors are not considered symptoms of an underlying disease; rather, the behaviors themselves are thought to be the problem. The abnormal behaviors are eliminated through restraining and conditioning.

3. In the psychoanalytic model, abnormal behaviors are viewed as evidence of unresolved unconscious conflicts between the id, the ego, and the superego. Treatment usually involves psychoanalysis and a detailed investigation of the desires and conflicts in the unconscious.
4. The humanistic-existential model depicts abnormal behaviors as the result of failure to fulfill self-potential. Such failure may occur when people lose contact with their real thoughts and emotions or become isolated from other people; eventually, they may view their lives as meaningless and useless. Their behaviors, in this model, are considered to result from family and cultural influences and a distorted self-awareness. (Dworetzky 474-476)<sup>2</sup>

When we examine the language in each of these models, we note that in these models and in the practice of psychology, madness in its varied forms is seen as abnormal, as something that must be corrected; there is also the belief that some measure must be taken to restore the individual back to what society views as normal. More pointedly, madness is seen as a weakness in the individual, in the individual's body, in the individual's family or in the environment in which the individual operates.

Theorists like Thomas Szasz, R.D. Laing, and Michel Foucault as well as feminist theorists like Phyllis

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, information in this dissertation that refers directly to psychological terms and definitions is taken directly from *Psychology, a principles of psychology text*, written by John P. Dworetzky (St. Paul, Minnesota, West Publishing Company, 1988).

Chesler, Shoshana Felman, Elaine Showalter, and Jane Ussher have posed challenges to these theories. Szasz argues that mental illness is a myth, maintained by psychiatrists and clinical psychologists who profit from the belief that mental illness is a medical problem. Szasz believes that we tend to label as mental illness behavior and ways of thinking that are not accepted by society; he believes only mental illnesses linked to physiological processes should be considered as such. Laing's basic premise is that insanity is actually supersanity; the label mental illness is merely a response of an inferior majority who cannot understand the complexities of the supersane. Foucault, adding to the aforementioned, argues that madness conceals the secret enterprises of truth; therefore, it is knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

Those who examine madness from a woman's point-of-view, like Showalter, Chesler, Felman, and Ussher, take issue with older, male theories of madness that make madness the domain of women. They argue that "madness is the desperate communication of the powerless" (Showalter 4)—women who have been denied access to power and even personal authority; or it is a label assigned to women who

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<sup>3</sup> For a more indepth examination of these theories, see Szasz's *Primary Values and Major Contentions*, R.D. Laing's *Sanity, Madness and the Family and Conversations with R.D. Laing*; Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*. Full citations given in the references.

fail in or refuse to accept socially prescribed roles for women. Elaine Showalter in *The Female Malady* explores perceptions of madness not only as a cultural phenomenon but also as a female phenomenon. Madness supposedly embodies that which distinguishes men from women—irrationality, instability, and emotions out of control. In fact, Showalter illustrates that because of the diametric opposition in the definitions of male and female, from a patriarchal view, madness is equivalent to or parallels those elements of femininity at its highest.

Chesler attempts to give attention to cultural variations through gender in her *Women and Madness*. In this work, Chesler draws on mythology to engage women's social position and psychological conditions. She equates the construction of woman as well as madness with powerlessness. Women gone mad are perceived as "failed Mothers and Goddesses." Having "failed at" (read: rejected) the role prescribed for them, they are pronounced unfit, mentally unsound.

Showalter is clear on the fact that she is not advancing the argument that madness is a form of protest, and Shoshana Felman adds, "Far from being a form of contestation, mental illness is a *request for help*, a manifestation both of cultural impotence and political

castration" (21-22). She continues, "Madness is the impasse confronting those whom cultural conditioning has deprived of the very means of protest and self-affirmation" (qtd.in Showalter 5). Placing the onus of women's madness on the misogyny of patriarchy and questioning madness as a category, Jane Ussher argues that

Misogyny makes women mad either through naming us as the "Other," through reinforcing the phallogentric discourse, or through depriving women of power, privilege and independence. Or it causes us to be named as mad. It dismisses witches, wise women, suffragettes, and battered women as mad. Labelling us mad silences our voices. We can be ignored. The rantings of a mad woman are irrelevant. Her anger is impotent. (Ussher 7)

A number of psychologists and psychiatrists approach madness from a point-of-view informed by culture; they recognize not only the inadequacies of Western medical and social science in approaching the colonized subject but also the prejudices that accompany Western notions. They address madness from a stance that argues with the West, critiquing the label. Some argue that Africana madness is an invention of the West to keep racial dichotomies in place—there had to be a reminder that "they" are not "us"—while others argue that madness is a universal reality, varying only in cultural perception and reception. Still

others propose that conditions of oppression and colonization create "African" madness.

Megan Vaughan, focusing on British colonial Africa, writes, "Medicine and its associated disciplines played an important part in constructing 'the African' as an object of knowledge, and elaborated classification systems and practices which have been seen as intrinsic to the operation of colonial power" (8). Colonial medical discourse, then, operated to a large extent through the articulation of notions of difference (12). Vaughan suggests, colonial medicine has gone as far as classifying "African madness" in relation to Europe: the African and unAfrican (European) types, simply those whose visions do not include a desire to be like Europeans and those whose do. The mad African more often included the colonial subject who was insufficiently Other—who spoke of being rich, of hearing voices through radio sets, of being powerful, who imitated the white man in dress and behavior and who therefore threatened to disrupt the ordered non-communication between ruler and ruled (101). Thus the madness of the colonial subject lies in her tendency to imitate the ruler or her inability to be in control of herself. The mimicry the colonizer claims to want of the



colonized is the very thing that assigns her to the realm of the mad.

In *Difference and Pathology*, Sander Gilman examines Western European and American stereotypes associated with images of race, sexuality, and pathology. Like Vaughan, Gilman recognizes the association of both Blackness and madness as "clearly a product of the mythologizing of both the Black and the mad." He explains, "It is the union of two abstractions of the Other. Both are focuses for the projection of Western culture's anxieties" (148). Gilman recounts the historical lineage of the stereotype of Blackness and madness, and finds that many scientists believed that the physiology of Blacks predisposed them to mental illness, that the potential for madness is inherent in the nature of Blacks. These responses were later "legitimized" by a study conducted during the slavery period that revealed that 3000 of 17,000 mad people were Black, most of whom were free. Scientists came to the conclusion then that it was the "simple nature of the Black, their childlike essence, which did not permit them to function well in the complexities of the modern world [and which] predisposed them to madness" (140). Like Fanon, Gilman (and Vaughan) realize(s) "the mad Black is the nexus at which all fears coalesce" (136).

African American sociologist Patricia Hill Collins' work *Black Feminist Thought* does not specifically focus on madness, but her recognition that Black women are defined in American culture (in terms of stereotypes) and are defined according to sociological and psychological models that have nothing to do with their reality embraces Vaughan's and Gilman's theses. Since African peoples' approaches to life are not necessarily the same, there are indeed inherent differences in the way African peoples approach culture and madness.

Collins' claims center on the issue that Black women are repositories of subjugated knowledge. The field of social sciences, she asserts, offers inadequate training for studying subordinate groups because these groups have long had to use alternative ways to create independent self-definitions and self-valuations and to rearticulate them. The factors that contribute to Black women's mental imbalances no matter how mild are perhaps far removed from those of others.

Collins' theories echo the works of African psychiatrists Vikram Patel and Thomas Adeoye Lambo, who emphasize the importance of African forms of healing and community perception of madness. Africans regard mental illness as the "material sign of lack of harmony between a

person and his environment" (qtd. in Pretorius 534).

Lambo, a Nigerian psychiatrist who employs traditional techniques of so-called "witch doctors"—free association, group therapy and behavior modification—acknowledges, "Africans treat crazy people as part of everyday life" (71). It is probably for this reason that Vikram Patel believes that approaches to madness must be culturally specific to be effective (the emic approach); in fact, he points out that local concepts of mental illness are not the same as Western concepts, and he questions whether the term "mental" should be dropped. Rather than being an individual problem, madness in Africa is seen as a community problem, and often the community works together to restore the individual—though this does not always happen in the particular novels I study in this project.

Psychiatrist Albert C. Gaw in his *Cultural Ethnicity and Mental Illness* questions Western approaches to madness on the ethnic subject, but his purpose, like Lambo's, centers around examining the expression [and treatment] of mental illness in the context of culture. He asserts that "cultural concepts, values, and beliefs shape the way mental symptoms are expressed and how individuals and their families respond to such distresses . . . cultural norms dictate when a cluster of symptoms and behaviors are

labeled 'normal' or 'abnormal'" (xvii). Offering an ethnic-specific focus on mental illness, Gaw comes from the perspective that our present mental healing system is a product of Western Civilization and culture, and as such, it must be "sensitive to areas of potential cultural variations" when applied to patients of another ethnic background. Mental illness is highly stigmatized in Africana cultures. Among the assumed causes of "madness" are magical fright, soul loss, and hex: in other words, the individual is seen as "going off," "having trouble" or not being "right in the head." Treatment of these illnesses comes in the form of herbs, roots (folk medicine), church, and pastors (the last two used far more by women). While the other theorists have approached madness as caused by internal struggles as a result of external struggles, Gaw leaves the responsibility outside the individual, in the realm of the spiritual or supernatural, and healing comes in traditional (handed down for centuries) forms. Both the causes and the remedies carry power, but the subject does not. S/he is simply the medium through which the other entities work.

What comes through clearly in Gaw's analysis of mental illness in Africana cultures is that Black people and particularly women seek help outside the realm of medical

science. It is very unusual for Black women to seek psychotherapy. This could be attributed to either cultural expectations, limitations, taboos, finances, or, as Phyllis Chesler points out, to the reality that "Black women are discriminated against and *misunderstood* whenever they make contact with the psychiatric world" (216).

Martinician psychiatrist Frantz Fanon and Tunisian philosopher Albert Memmi both assert that the colonizer to colonized situation creates mental dis-ease. In the preface to his 1965 *Colonizer and the Colonized* Memmi queries, "How could he [the colonized] hate the colonizers yet admire them so passionately?" (x). This question reveals to a great extent the duality of the colonized mind. In this study of the colonial world and the varying attitudes between its two major components (colonized and colonizer), Memmi pursues the thesis that "man is a product of his objective situation" and pinpoints experience and suffering—"all the byways of human behavior"—as the source of human conduct as opposed to some innate (psychological) part of ourselves over which we have no control. Thus, it is the experience of colonization (usurped freedom and cultural and social responsibility, social and historical mutilation) that "creates" the colonized. Memmi declares that the colonized are forced into a permanent duality—as

operating in two psychical worlds, and of being assigned a memory that has nothing to do with their reality—their own history or present conditions. We must look at this duality from two different angles. There is that aspect of duality that Dr. W.E.B. DuBois clarified early in this century: The ability to function effectively in two different cultures. We have come to embrace this duality as one of the strengths of our "racial" character. Then, there is the duality that forces one into an awkward and unstable position of self-doubt, self-hatred, and impotence. The colonial subject looks around and the world that s/he knows is literally divided in two: the white world of plenty and the Black world of lack. The white world offers comfort, ease, money, and power. His/her own world is a confusing combination of hard labor, dirt, ignorance, hunger, and impotence. We can expect little more from these conditions than severe psychological consequences.

Like Memmi, much of Fanon's works focus on the (mental) consequences of the binary order of colonial society and is essential reading in understanding the link between the crisis of the individual and the crisis of the community. He argues against the psychological philosophy of the day, the insistence that the individual factor be

taken into account through psychoanalysis; Fanon asserts, "For the Black man [and woman], alienation is not an individual question" (*Black Skin* 11). In *Black Skin White Masks*<sup>4</sup> Fanon tests the limits of Blackness. He engages what happens to Blackness when it encounters whiteness, what happens to the individual of the community when s/he realizes s/he is constructed not only in oppositional terms to whites but also in terms of negativity. Whether what occurs is "simply" an identity crisis or the beginning of madness, something changes; the individual changes and/or the individual's perception of the collective changes.

In "The Fact of Blackness," a chapter in *Black Skin*, Fanon gives a powerful glimpse into the fragmentation of the colonial subject in the face of accusing whiteness. The scenario involves a man—Fanon himself—who has been identified by a child who has already "learned" that "the Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly." A white child gazes at the Black man and assumes the "Negro" (who is actually shaking from the cold) is shaking from rage/anger and is about to do something violent. He reports this to his mother. At the child's announcement, "Mama, see the Negro! I am frightened!" Fanon responds:

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<sup>4</sup> *Black Skin, White Masks* will be abbreviated *Black Skin*.

"I could no longer laugh . . . I existed triply: I occupied space. I moved toward the other . . . and the evanescent other, hostile but not opaque, transparent, not there, disappeared . . . I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors." (112-114)

Revealed in this scenario is that what is "normal" (human behavior) for Black people becomes "abnormal" in relation to whites or is seen as abnormal to whites. The gazer "creates" the abnormality-the stereotype-and because the one being objectified realizes what is in the other's mind, s/he begins to look at her/himself and question, compare her/himself to the gazer: What does s/he have? Why doesn't s/he? S/he becomes less and less a person in relation to the colonial master or mistress. The child adds another category to what he has been taught-the Negro is mad.

In *Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon describes colonialism as a "systematic negation of the other person and a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity" and a "fertile purveyor for psychiatric hospitals" (249-250). This book studies the colonial situation and its effects on the creation of a nation and analyzes the prospect of decolonization on all levels. In his chapter on colonial war and mental disorders he speaks of "reactionary psychoses" in which prominence is given to



the event which has given rise to the disorder (251). His case studies in this chapter involve individuals driven to madness by the colonial crisis. Some of them found in madness their only escape from the horrors of colonialism and the reality of (the Algerian) war; others found escape in rage, or violence, by becoming direct or indirect<sup>5</sup> participants in war.

Madness is the result of disempowerment and a foreign and abusive system of governing African peoples. The mind reaches its limit and "heads for madness." Fanon, however, calls colonial subjects to (violent) action to claim the right to their own minds. Often, he has found that the violence he endorses precedes madness.

I have spoken of Memmi and Fanon thus far, and I must admit that though I am thoroughly convinced that their works are a vital part of my project, I am suspicious of them. While I know during "their time" writing was (male) gendered, the experiences they describe are severely gendered as well. They surveyed the colonial landscape through male eyes, rendered male versions of the colonial

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<sup>5</sup> For instance, a case he discusses involves 13- and 14-year-old Algerian boys who killed their European playmate (whose company they enjoyed) because Europeans were killing their family members. The rationale of the 13 year old was that the Europeans doing the killing were too big and too old for them to kill, but they could handle killing "someone their own size." The 14-year-old, unafraid of prison, simply asked Fanon if he'd ever seen Europeans in prison.

experience, and ignored that there are other sides. There are gendered gaps in their studies. The interesting thing about Fanon, in particular, which many, many others have noted, is that when he does pay attention to women, he offers negative attention and commentary on their condition, status, intellect, and abilities. For example, in *Black Skin* he offers two intriguing chapters—one entitled "The Woman of Color and the White Man" and another entitled "The Man of Color and the White Woman. While in the African male chapter he thoroughly examines (and acknowledges) the cultural/social conditions that created such a psychological phenomenon (Black men yearning for white women), he dismisses the African female's desires for a white man and talks about how her desires only contribute to the African male's inferiority complex. But Black women have always experienced such devaluation of their experiences (and have often contributed to it themselves).

Many others, like Grier and Cobbs, authors of *Black Rage*, and Reginald Jones, the editor of *Black Psychology* recognize the discrepancies in "white" theory and its inapplicability to Blacks. They emphasize using specifically Black experiences to clarify Black madness and rage. Collins and Erna Brodber criticize social science methodologies that train human scientists to distance

themselves from the researched, rendering the "researched" an object of study rather than the subject of her own story, history, and experience with madness.

Definitions of madness and approaches to psychological issues are fluid and ambiguous even, but that there is a link between madness and literature is practically indisputable. Gilbert and Gubar, Showalter, Felman, and Chesler clearly link madness and literature, and even the ancient Greeks considered writing a divine art induced by Dionysian frenzy or madness. But how do I claim assertively that a theory of madness arises out of the literature and that literature tells us convincingly that madness can be empowering? The tendency here is to assume that I am endorsing romantic notions of madness, and to insist, like Chesler and others, that mental illness is a request for help, and to remind me that it is evidence of a woman's frailty and weakness. Marta Caminero-Santangelo in *The Madwoman Can't Speak* goes to great lengths to disprove the prevailing feminist philosophy on madness in literary texts—she insists that madness is not subversive, that acts of violence and madness are not resistance. The reality is there has been nothing romantic or beautiful about Africana

women's oppression—We<sup>6</sup> have had no darker skinned woman to be "positively" constructed against, no declarations that the "sanctity and purity" of our womanhood must be rescued from Black men; very few of us have had the luxury of sitting home and having grapes peeled for us—and there has been nothing sentimental or romantic about the vicious realities of madness. The message that comes through the literary works is that the psychical, social and physical bondage of being a Black woman is so intense that madness is either a welcomed, necessary, or inevitable state or experience. The failure of Fanon and others like him to capture the colonial struggle of women is redeemed by Black women—creative writers who are willing to risk all and go to the brink of madness to tell our story with brutal honesty. Thus, the most potent theories of madness, particularly Africana women's madness, come out of our texts.

Juletane, Myriam Warner-Vieyra's "mad" Caribbean character living in Africa, incapable of recalling the lyrics to a tune she remembers, makes up her own. In the

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<sup>6</sup> Please note that my use of the first person plural pronoun "we" and its variants in reference to Africana women and writers is not a faux pas. I use it not to demonstrate what I consider an obvious personal connection to the women I write about but to acknowledge that their pain and suffering are also my pain and suffering. I also do so to take the advice of Erna Brodber and embrace my own "I."

making of her own lyrics, Juletane tells the story of African women:

I am frustrated, depressed,  
I have no home,  
I am an exile, an alien,  
They say I've lost my mind.  
I am a wreck, drifting in the wind,  
I have lost all my illusions.

An article in the July 1996 issue of *Essence* focuses on Black women's suicide—in the shadow of the suicides of outstanding Black women artists—Singer Phyllis Hyman and feminist-activist-poet, Terri Jewell. This article reports that compared with Black men, white men, and white women, Black women have the lowest rate of suicide, despite the fact that we are over-worked, over-burdened, over-tired. Not only was I haunted by the stories of these dynamic women who could no longer cope with "the jeerings of demons within" but I was also haunted because the pained letters of these victims and last conversations and interviews—echo sentiments of characters in the "fictional" texts this project studies. While being the lowest statistic<sup>7</sup> might attest to our strength of character, it might also indicate that we have been lying to ourselves about our pain; it might also suggest that making us the "mule uh de world"

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<sup>7</sup> 1.6 deaths per 100,000 persons, compared with 12.4 deaths per 100,000 persons for all races. In fact the suicide rate of White women is nearly three times as high; that of Black men, eight times as high; and that of White men, 14 times as high.

was an inspired deed. Nevertheless, the two bits of information, one based on a pained reality and the other evolving from fiction, are central to my thesis. But how do we distinguish fiction from reality? Where is the bridge? Do we even need to make a distinction? Are the madresses that we encounter in literature really some part of a central reality for Black women? "Is the story only the mask for the truth?" queries Tashi-Evelyn. There is at least a blurring of fiction and reality and from these two types of texts—Black women's experiences and Black women's writing—a theory of madness evolves.

They define madness as a way to cope with life (rather than choosing suicide). As a protector. As the one right and choice a woman can make to preserve herself and her people. For Selina, in Rebeka Njau's *Ripples in the Pool*, madness is revenge against an abusive father and husband, against the innocence she lost, a vexatious water spirit that leads her on a murderous spree. For Nellie in *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*, Brodber's complex tale, madness is the kumbla that protects you without caring; it is fragmentation to wholeness. For Tashi in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, madness is the deep-seated realities found in paintings of a grotesque bird and a woman's crippled foot; madness is fulfilled in resistance.

For the pubescent girls Beka in Zee Edgell's *Beka Lamb*, Tambuzai in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, and Tee in Merle Hodge's *Crick Crack Monkey*, madness is the thing that ever threatens, always imminent, to be escaped. For Jamaica Kincaid's Lucy and Dangarembga's Nyasha madness is anger housed in powerlessness. For Sarah in Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, it is the irreconciliation of the glaring realities of Blackness and Black woman-ness in the face of whiteness and privilege. For Pecola Breedlove of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* madness is a choice between rejection and insanity. For Juletane, madness is an incomprehensible state of constant agony and culture shock. For Elizabeth in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*, madness is the hellish struggle between the powers of good and evil. For *The Color Purple's* Sofia, madness is silence—broken by laughter, speech broken by silence. For so many others it is just a moment, a fleeting moment with eternal consequences, such as Morrison's Sethe (*Beloved*) who kills the suckling child when she believes the white men are coming to re-enslave her and her family. For the beautiful Toussine in *Bridge of Beyond* by Simone Schwartz-Bart, it is the "madwoman badluck" that claims her daughters' lives. It only lasts

the duration of her grief, and ends just as quickly as it begins.

These texts all suggest that madness is some part of a larger struggle (with and against dominant forces in Africana women's lives), and they all approach the madness and its underlying causes from various angles. The texts speak to each other, responding, critiquing, complementing—each offering its own cultural or feminist slant on the whole issue of madness as a social text.

I approach this project placing foremost emphasis on Africana women's experience in literature because that experience is informed by and echoes Black women's real life experiences. There is a "psychological sense" to the literature, to borrow Jamaica Kincaid's phrase. My project involves a study of the *representation* of madness in literature or *literary* interpretations of madness; these representations and interpretations may at times have little in common with textbook definitions of madness, but many Africana women will confirm that they recognize their own situations and reactions in the texts, that there is reality in fiction, and the fiction tells a truth that might not be told or heard otherwise.

Whose madness do we examine here—the writers' as creators of fictional madness or the characters' who act



out the madness? Indeed, some writers have blurred the line between fiction and reality even more because of their mental dis-ease. In many ways, Bessie Head's mad characters bear out the author's own story and struggle with madness. Of course, Jamaica Kincaid is not shy about discussing her permanent duality, loving yet hating her mother and motherland, that keeps her on the edge of sanity. Then, Gayl Jones, author of many troubling narratives, disturbing in their shameless honesty, on the heels of the release of *Healing*, her first novel in a decade, is arrested and placed in a mental facility after a stand-down between her partner and the police. She and he lived a secret, secluded life, and in the end, planned to stand up to the authorities and die together. Many of these writers have training in psychology or sociology—Miriam Warner-Vieyra and Erna Brodber for example. Tsitsi Dangarembga has medical training. In addition to her creative work, Brodber continues to work toward improving lives of Jamaican women. Although the primary objective of this project is to study the madness of characters, it is imperative that we recognize the emotional and mental state of authors who gave the characters life. While the character is empowered through her madness, it seems the author is empowered through the exorcism of her demons.

In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault declares, "Madness conceals the secret enterprises of truth" (33); therefore, "madness is knowledge" (21). African women writers use madness to teach us about the condition of the colonized and tell us what we might not know otherwise. Madness is born out of the strict limitations imposed and lack of access to sites of power, but madness can be a site of resistance and power. Though it is a strategy for empowerment, the disempowered subject does not necessarily seek madness, does not even long for it. Madness can happen to the disempowered subject or the disempowered subject can subconsciously choose madness. A distinction must be made. To assume victims of subjugation are omnipotent once they "turn mad," is a gross exaggeration, but to assume madness is weakness simplifies it; it ignores madness' potential to protect, to instruct, to distract from an unbearable reality while we learn to cope. I do not refer here to power as we normally perceive power. Power is a loaded word in the mouth of third worlders. It is no secret that colonial and (post)colonial subjects are disempowered, no longer in control. They do not control their homelands, their nations (since they are still for the most part dependent upon the economic resources of their former colonizers, etc.). I hope here to unmask the

madnesses of the African women and demonstrate their strategic use of madness for empowerment. Tied up in 'dis'powerment is their identity, with which they always grapple, their sexuality (specifically their bodies) which is constantly under attack, their conflicts and anxiety over or attachment to the larger, greater body of their people. Madness is an empowering experience. The acts of madness are acts of people no longer constrained by societal limitations. The broken human spirit is mended in madness. When Jane Eyre's Bertha burns down Thornfield Hall and leaps to her death, she reclaims her life; there is power in resistance. Power in re-claiming. We must contemplate the moment between the burning and her leap. That is where her power and healing are located...right in the center of madness.

While in certain Western conceptions of madness, madness is equal to a loss of control of one's body (mind, soul, etc.), it is for Africana women a result of loss of control of her own body—her own person—and of the homeland or homeplace's loss of control (the people's loss of control of their own political circumstances). Thus, in many texts which deal with madness as a central theme, madness is or is the result of a move toward re-claiming the body—either her own or the collective body.

Historically and scientifically, the Africana woman's body has been the site of physical, social, scientific, and medical mutilation and abuse. Our woman's body has been inscribed as unholy, vile, undesirable. Like the "mule uh de world," Zora Neale Hurston pronounced we have been, our bodies have borne children that were not ours and burdens that were not of our own making; under the lash, they have suckled white lips while our own children hungered; they have endured the whip and forced entry. They have been spat on, held up for amusement and speculation, treated like an aberration. Our vaginas have been measured, spread open for comparison—to bear witness to white women's virtue. The world is convinced of our unattractiveness in the face of "stunning," blonde, thin whiteness. These things have led Black women the world over not only to defend our bodies but also to defend our people through and with our bodies. And the defense has come at a high cost.

The (ab)use of the body through and by varying degrees of madness is a recurring theme in Africana women's texts: Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy* responds to attacks on the Body of her small island home and limitations placed on her own body through an insatiable and experimental sexuality, a slap in the face of the Victorian code of conduct in which she is schooled; suffering and coping with extreme migraine

headaches which take on the character of two personages which represent her internalized fears, Elizabeth in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*, facing horrible myths about African men and African women's sexuality, gives into fears that she is sexually repulsive and not sexual (sexy) enough; Nyasha in *Nervous Conditions* becomes anorexic and bulimic, unable to reconcile the Eurocentrism of her early years and the Africentrism of her teen years. Tashi in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* goes through the ritual of female circumcision; *Beloved's* Sethe kills the suckling child, the baby attached to her body; when that child returns a full grown woman-ghost, Sethe decreases in both physical and mental energy as "Beloved" increases. Cora Lee in *Women of Brewster Place* has baby after baby, not to benefit from welfare or because she cannot keep her legs closed (as some controlling images of Black women in America would have us believe), but because the newness of the baby stirs in her premature maternal inclinations she felt as a child when each Christmas she received a new doll. Rebeka Njau's *Ripples in the Pool's* Selina is a now married prostitute who cannot carry a baby to full term. Toycie in *Beka Lamb* "loses her mind" and in one act both commits suicide and homicide, killing herself and her unborn child, when her

teenage boyfriend-lover rejects both. Pecola steps over into madness when she miscarries her father's child. The list goes on.

In abducting and selling African peoples into the slavery of the United States, Britain, and the Caribbean Islands and parts of South America, slaveholders and traders enacted a crime against the collective human spirit of Africa—convincing a people that their bodies are not their own and that the body of people who make up their homes, their nations—their kinship ties—are not reliable protectors of either the individual or the collective.<sup>8</sup> The display of Sara Bartmaan (both alive and dead), who became known as the "Hottentot Venus," at scientific fairs and conventions, is symptomatic of European arrogance and its persistence in its claim to total ownership of the Black body, an ownership that maintains the right to denigrate or subject the possession in any way the owner chooses. In the face of slavery Blacks in the New World and in the United Kingdom were reminded through violence against the physical body and the psyche that their bodies could be (and were) bought and owned. The very idea that an individual can be owned is a chilling concept and an

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<sup>8</sup> While I recognize that slavery did not begin with the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, the horrific forms of slavery exhibited in the Americas and Great Britain were the first to treat other human beings as less than human while still desiring the body of these "others"

unsettling part of our world historical memory. And slaves-owned persons—who through attempted escape or insurrection, rebelled against their reality were often "broken in" by severe task masters, removed from family and friends who provided emotional support, tortured, raped, or killed. Thus it was certain madness born of a spirit that could take no more that led Harriet Jacobs, to claim her body by choosing with whom she would share her sexuality, remove herself to her seven-year retreat and preserve her children's lives as well as her own.

Nineteenth century theories of female sexuality describe Black women as little more than whores. If this is not clear from slave narratives, it is clear from mythic images of white women, constructed against the supposedly profound darkness and depravity of Black women. Mary Poovey's *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* recounts the stages of European women's progression from the "errant part of man," "the sexualized image of woman as willful flesh, into domestic ideal." Poovey explains that this transformation was concurrent with the consolidation of bourgeois power (in England) and the redefinition and relocation of the code of virtue (10). Black (feminist) thinkers have their own ideas about the redefinition and relocation of the code

of virtue. In *Ain't I a Woman* bell hooks elaborates more fully on nineteenth century ideals of sexuality. In her estimation and many others', the image of white women was transformed not simply because of an alteration in class politics but because white men now had Black women to blame for their sexual indiscretions and violence against women. Hooks writes that the image of Black women was diametrically opposed to that of white women. Sara Baartman, the Black female slave mentioned earlier was the ultimate "case in point." Through historical and even cultural example, then, we can conclude whoever "owns" the body writes the script. For Black women suffering under slavery and imperialism, the script made their bodies something to be feared as well as desired, their bodies are both exoticized and intriguing yet repulsive and diseased.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore nineteenth century "convictions" about femininity and virtue revolved around the myth of four cardinal virtues of womanhood. These virtues did not really exist in white women, but Black women were denied even a remote possibility of such definition. This fact

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<sup>9</sup> Today, this is played out even more vividly with young Black teenage girls thrusting their hardly clad bodies about in rap videos. While cultural analyst would have us believe that this is a way in which young Black girls are demonstrated their "ownership" of their own bodies, we need to look no further than the backers of these projects to find who actually "owns" and writes the script. Generally speaking, white men.



caused Black women to redefine woman and womanhood for themselves and for their circumstances. Often this revising has involved deconstructing controlling images of Black women, many of which are outlined in Sandra Bartky's (Chapter 2, "On Psychological Oppression") *Femininity and Domination*. Her analysis illustrates a (modern day) need for such revision. In examining points raised by Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, she writes:

The stereotypes that sustain sexism are similar in many ways to those that sustain racism. Like white women, Black and brown persons of both sexes have been regarded as *childlike, happiest, when they are occupying their "place;" more intuitive than rational, more spontaneous than deliberate, closer to nature, and less capable of substantial cultural accomplishment*. Black men and women of all races have been victims of sexual stereotyping: the Black man and the Black woman . . . *are lustful and hotblooded; they are thought to lack the capacities for instinctual control that distinguish people from animals*. What is seen as an excess in persons of color appears as a deficiency in the white woman; comparatively frigid, she has been nonetheless, defined by her sexuality as well, here her reproductive role or function. In regard to capability and competence, Black women have, again, an excess of what in white women is seen as a deficiency. White women have been seen as incapable and incompetent: no matter, for these are traits of the truly feminine woman. *Black women, on the other hand, have been seen as overly capable, hence, as unfeminine bitches who threaten, through their very competence, to castrate their men* (23-24).

Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, is even more lucid in her critique of controlling images. Her

critique outlines the four controlling images of Black women: the matriarch, the mammy, the jezebel, and the welfare mother. In her analysis, these stereotypes emphasize either the sexualization or nonsexualization of Black women. But neither is truly positive nor truly empowered. While each of these stereotypes is perceived as a demonstration of Black women's ownership of the body, they fail in that these women do not act for themselves, rather in concert with certain social stimuli and conditions.

In her analysis of female "work" outside the home, Poovey, cited earlier, notes that the problem of female aggression could be conceptualized as female sexuality (15). Often Black women "on the move," providing for themselves and their families, have been accused of emasculating their husbands and lovers, and have been accused of being overly aggressive in pursuit of success. Taking Poovey's analysis of Victorian attitudes into consideration, Black women who have always participated in the physical survival of their families and communities and who (in this country and out) have always had to provide some form of protection—for themselves, their children, and their husbands, have been and will be considered aggressive, therefore sexual. Of course the leap from work

to aggression to highly sexual leaves a lot open for explanation. Needless to say, this leap has not been explained. So the code of virtues prescribed for European upperclass and middle class women of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and its United States parallel, the cult of true womanhood, as Jacobs clearly illustrates, is beyond the realm of possibility for most women, and most specifically Black women.

Female myths and the types of strongholds they place on women's attitudes and behavior are not confined to (real or imagined) African tribes. French existentialist and a forerunner of the contemporary feminism, Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* describes male myths of woman as various and contradictory:

She is at once Eve and the Virgin Mary. She is an idol, a servant, a source of life, a power of darkness; she is the elemental silence of truth; she is artifice, gossip, and falsehood; she is healing and presence and sorceress, she is man's prey, his downfall, she is everything he is not and that he longs for, his negation and his *raison d'etre*. (143)

Beauvoir argues that men have cast women as Other, himself as standard, and have used these objectifications to dominate women; furthermore women themselves keep such myths intact by not only conforming to the idealization(s) but by standing firmly in favor of them and by their accepting the treatment of other women.

Stereotypes surrounding Black women have been just as varied but not so contradictory. Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought* outlines four controlling myths or images of Black women: the mammy, the matriarch, the welfare mother, and the jezebel.<sup>10</sup> Collins, a social

<sup>10</sup> Collins defines mammy as the faithful, obedient domestic servant. "Created to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain Black women's long-standing restriction to domestic service. The mammy image represents the normative yardstick used to evaluate all Black women's behavior. By loving, nurturing, and caring for her white children and "family" better than her own, the mammy symbolizes the dominant group's perceptions of the ideal Black female relationship to elite white male power." Collins, citing Barbara Christian, argues that the mammy image is needed to contain all the fears of the physical female. The functions of the mammy involve the body as sensuous, as funky, the part of woman that white southern America was profoundly afraid of.

The second controlling image—the matriarch—symbolizes the mother figure in Black homes. "Just as the mammy represents "good" Black mother, the matriarch represents "bad" Black mother. Matriarchs are accused of failing to fulfill their traditional womanly duties; they are working mothers who spend too much time away from home and cannot supervise their children and are a major contributing factor of their children's school failure. "As overly aggressive, unfeminine women, Black matriarchs allegedly emasculate their lovers and husbands. The matriarch is essentially a failed mammy, a negative stigma applied to those African-American women who dared to violate the image of the submissive hard-working servant" (74).

The welfare mother, tied to Black women's increasing dependence on the post WWII welfare state, is essentially an updated version of the breeder woman image created during slavery and provides an ideological justification for efforts to harness Black women's fertility to the needs of a changing political economy. The welfare mother, like the matriarch, is considered a bad mother, but unlike the matriarch she is not aggressive enough. While the matriarch's unavailability contributes to her children's poor socialization, the welfare mother's accessibility is deemed the problem. She is portrayed as being content to sit around and collect welfare, shunning work and passim on her bad values to her offspring. The image of the welfare mother represents another failed mammy, one who is unwilling to become "de mule u de world."

Lastly, the Jezebel, whore, or sexually aggressive woman is "central in the nexus of elite white male images of Black womanhood because efforts to control Black women's sexuality lie at the heart of Black women's oppression. This image of the sexually denigrated Black woman is the foundation underlying elite white male conceptualizations of the mammy, matriarch, and welfare mother. Connecting all three is the common theme of Black women's sexuality. The mammy, the only

scientist, argues that perpetuation of these myths-like  
 Beauvoir's—is designed to keep Black women in a certain  
 political and social space. Other myths (such as "the  
 vamp" or "Sapphire," reinterpretations of the four  
 controlling images), Black male responses to attitudes of  
 Black women, also rely on the stereotypes of the elite  
 white male's conceptualization of Black women.  
 Though Fanon contends colonial conditioning leaves the  
 colonized and (post)colonized with the burning and urgent  
 question, "Who am I?", "Africana women (characters) are not  
 asking the question, "Who am I?" They are telling us  
 convincingly WHO I AM, talking back to constructions of  
 difference and stereotypes that are designed to keep them  
 in certain designated spaces. They are also telling us  
 madness is one last and often desperate attempt at power.  
 In the case of the madness of Africana women, power is  
 whatever moment of control we receive over our own lives,  
 circumstances, etc. No matter what the cost.  
 Although my commentary and readings incline toward an  
 African American viewpoint, I approach madness from a  
 multicultural perspective, rather than from a perspective

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positive image, is a desexed individual. The matriarch represents the  
 sexually aggressive woman, one who emasculates Black men because she  
 will not permit them to assume roles as Black patriarchs. The welfare  
 mother represents a woman of low morals and uncontrolled sexuality.  
 See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, pp. 67-78.

which focuses on one culture or continent primarily because any discussion of African American or African Caribbean women's writing and madness is incomplete without attention to their ties to the Motherland. Our writing always honors Africa in one way or another, always reaches back to the place of origin—even if some of us have never been there or have never thought about our connection to it.

I see no major cultural conflicts because I deal with women's cultures, and there are simply some basic commonalities across African Diaspora cultures as well as globally. Furthermore, I would be missing the other part of the argument. That these women's madness often seems tied to something else—other than the political situation. It seems tied to familial relations, to being ignored, minimized, and erased, to being beaten.

I intend to engage texts by Africana women that defy boundaries of location and share common ground with each other. This study seeks to explore the psyche of the Black woman gone mad—of the woman who acts in a way that leaves her outside the realm of normalcy. Just as madness can be defined in many ways, so can normality. What is normal behavior? What is normal behavior for women? What is normal behavior for Black women, specifically? How does this behavior vary from place to place? Are madness and

normality part of the same continuum, or are they dependent upon who gazes and labels? This project seeks to push the limits of normality and madness and to ponder where they are distinguishable, where they meet, and where they coalesce and become one. In some of the texts, such as Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* and Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*, madness manifests itself in what the West would see as typical ways: hearing voices, hallucinations, acting aggressively toward innocent people. Then, there are texts such as Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy* and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* in which the characters respond in subtle ways to the social conditions in which they are supposed to function "normally." Their subtler madnesses lie in their inability to escape, even though they need desperately to do so. They suffer from placement in tense and "nervous conditions;" they have "nervous conditions." The madness of these characters is always in some way linked to the (post)colonial condition and to their flight from something they think they are to the core (assimilationists, "traditionalists," etc.); they seek desperately to eradicate some truth or reality that is too ugly to face. Lastly, there are the characters, such as Tashi in Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and Eva in Gayl Jones' *Eva's Man*, who go stark raving mad and

end up on a murderous spree for no logical or even obvious reason. Even after careful scrutiny, the logic of her actions escapes us.

The titles of Bessie Head's 1974 novel and Tsitsi Dangarembga's 1988 novel, to some extent say it all: The (post)colonial woman lives with/in "nervous conditions" and her madness is a complex "question of power." Whether we speak of Africans on the continent or diaspora African women in the Caribbean Islands and the United States, we talk about women who not only are disempowered but who *feel* disempowered and nervous. This is not just nervous tension that needs to be worked out one way or another; this is nervous tension that builds up as a result of long histories of oppression, histories of colonization, and the aftermath of colonization. The tension builds up to a frenzy that finds its completion in madness.

It would be easy to assume that Black women's texts across the Diaspora signify (upon) each other, that they all go back to some Ur text—perhaps, Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and maybe even, some colonial texts, like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* or a British woman's novel, Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. While Harriet Jacobs' seven-year retreat in a space that can hold just her personal space and the abuse and exploitation



which drove her to that hole certainly bespeaks the type of mania one feels compelled to "choose" (for the larger good; in this case the survival of her children) and the experiences of Africana women worldwide, the women novelists writing are not simply signifying Jacobs. They are also building upon her narrative, telling the story in their words from their experiences. The stories they tell are the dialogues they have with each other across colonial, post-colonial, and enslaved spaces.

CHAPTER 2  
DEAD END STREET: READING THE SIGNS, HITTING THE WALLS, AND  
SPEAKING MADNESS

*So the wall came up and Brewster Place became a dead end street.*

*Gloria Naylor, Women of Brewster Place*

Literary Meditations and Mediation

The madness of characters created in the minds of Africana women stem from and revolve around the attacks on our sexuality, identity, family, and community, and the texts themselves are often an outgrowth of the author's rage over these realities. To analyze the madness that drives characters and personas in Africana women's novels, short stories, poems, plays we must come to understand the anger that drives Black women to write them; we must recognize the kinds of social indignation that make us want to shout from the rooftops that we are fighting mad, but we are so trapped and powerless in that rage that we are sometimes incapacitated by it—mentally and physically. As Michelle Wallace declares, "Being a Black woman means frequent, impotent spells of self-consuming rage" (225). So, "anger, a reaction to the insanity of the world [. . .]

is a microcosm of madness" (Rieger 1). Madness, then, can be errant anger.

This chapter, then, serves as a secondary or experiential framework of sorts, providing insight into the real world and works of Africana women, which provides the material for our literary works. Our rage is fueled by and fuels the ongoing struggle to tear down walls of oppression that cage Black women in. Furthermore, reactions to Black women's rage demonstrate that in almost every part of the Africana world, for us to speak is itself madness.

In this way, the thesis of this chapter is similar to or at least parallels Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's thesis in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, which focuses on the madwoman character in nineteenth century British women's texts. In the chapter entitled "Infection in the Sentence," Gilbert and Gubar specifically argue that female writers empower themselves and subvert male authority through angry, mad, violent characters who serve as fictional revelations of the authors' own rage:

The explosive violence [. . .] that women writers continually imagine for themselves returns us to the phenomenon of the mad double so many of these women have projected into their works. For it is, after all, through the violence of the double that the female author enacts her own raging desire to escape male houses and male texts, while at the same time it is through the double's violence that this anxious author articulates for

herself the costly destructiveness of anger repressed until it can no longer be contained. (Gilbert and Gubar 85).

Similarly Elaine Showalter links madness and female creativity. In *The Female Malady* she argues, "Madness is the price women artists have had to pay for the exercise of their creativity in a male dominated culture" (4). Phyllis Chesler, in examining the lives of Sylvia Plath, Ellen West, Zelda Fitzgerald, and Elizabeth Packard comes to a similar conclusion: "Madness and confinement were both an expression of female powerlessness and an unsuccessful attempt to reject and overcome this state. Madness function[s...] as penalties for *being* female and for daring *not to be*" (16).

In these theorists' estimation, madness and female subjectivity and creativity were inextricably linked as a result of cultural mandates and expectations of (white) femininity. While Africana women have had a different set of obstacles to face, writing has been a tool for Black women's rage as well. Particularly here in America, beginning with our literary foremother Phillis Wheatly, Black women have had to couch our attacks, ire, and reproaches in self-deprecating, innocuous language, so that even Wheatly's seemingly benign poem, "On Being Brought from Africa to America" conceals the more powerful message

of insisting on the humanity and equality of Blacks. Through our texts Black female authors break through male-voiced rhetoric and male-dominated cultures to create female characters that critique and defy conventional male constructions and interpretations of women and women's experiences. This defiance is psychologically challenging, but not as costly as repression.

Though there are differences in culture, politics, education, social standing, Africana women in Africa, the Caribbean, Europe and the Americas share seriously painful realities. Sometimes we speak bluntly about these realities; at other times the realities must be couched in fiction, and readers must come to them dose by dose. At times the fiction and the reality are indistinguishable, mirroring each other in a way that elicits violent responses because, as Alice Walker's Tashi points out, "the story is a mask for the truth" (*PSJ* 130).

Bringing herself to the act of writing "the truth" can be a psychologically violent act for Africana woman writer. The rage can be so intense that it debilitates her and renders the writer incapable of coherent speech and writing. But it is exactly this mixture of anger, trauma, and a nagging need to break silences that Black women know that makes this chapter a necessary part of the

dissertation, and of course, helps me exorcise my own anger. In writing about madness as the anger of Black women, I am forced to face my own anger and seek ways to make it constructive. While onlookers may believe it is an act of madness<sup>1</sup> for Black women to openly speak about injustices and our pain and to invite public ridicule, scorn, or even censure, our writing, unapologetic in its honesty, is a necessary act. It is born out of anger and is imperative to achieve psychic as well as physical survival. While Black women essayists, speakers, thinkers wield the pen to break down oppressive walls that impede our survival, these writers seem to be reminding us that the characters they create are extensions of their own struggle. The characters brandish the pen to carry away the stones and gravel. For example, in a fit of emotion and anguish, Jamaica Kincaid's title character Lucy, with journal and pen in hand, at the sight of her freshly scribbled name, nears an emotional breakdown—that startles if not shocks some readers. In Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*, Elizabeth's "small boy" gives her a pad and pen to work through her madness while she lies in a bed in a mental institution. Miriam Warner-Vieyra's title character

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<sup>1</sup> They believe that we risk significant gains by offending those who have been "gracious," "generous," and "benevolent."

Juletane keeps a journal in which she writes her story that is found by her psychiatric nurse. Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nyasha writes fervently to her cousin Tambuzai to avoid her own insanity. Africana women writers use writing just as these characters did—through madness, to prevent varying degrees of madness, and to work through unspeakable rage. They write when they know they can no longer repress the pain and dejection, the fitful rages, the uncertainty, the unfairness, and the madness that is being a Black woman. They caution us, as did the writers referenced by Gilbert and Gubar, of the dreadful consequences of repressed rage. Mariama Ba, whose book *So Long a Letter* still meets resistance in certain parts of Africa, admonishes women to use books as a "weapon, a peaceful weapon" (qtd. in Nfah-Abbennyi 148).

Audre Lorde's poem "Power" warns of the violence and devastation that can erupt if—forced into silence—we do not learn to use our creative power to fight our demons and our battles. In the last stanza of the poem, she writes:

I have not been able to touch the destruction within  
me.

But unless I learn to use  
the difference between poetry and rhetoric  
my power too will run corrupt as poisonous mold  
or lie limp and useless as an unconnected wire  
and one day I will take my teenaged plug  
and connect it to the nearest socket  
raping an 85-year-old white woman

who is somebody's mother  
 and as I beat her senseless and set a torch to her  
 bed  
 a greek chorus will be singing in ¾ time  
 "Poor thing. She never hurt a soul. What beasts  
 they are." (*The Black Unicorn* 108-109)

As the last line of Lorde's poem illustrates, Black rage is often misnamed, misunderstood, and trivialized because of society's expectations. The violence described by Lorde is an unwritten text that also requires analysis, for it is merely symptomatic of the larger unexpressed rage stoked by decades and centuries of oppression.

Fictional works serve as mediations of reality. Africana women are so swept up in oppressive societal dictates, expectations, and stereotypes that our very lives are built around debunking them. They are so embedded in the culture and in our lives and personalities that we begin to believe that resistance is abnormal and crazy. We begin to fear the consequences of resistance—rejection, exile, and threats. Writing allows Africana women writers to negotiate such spaces of terror, "unmediated dread" (hooks *Critical Fictions* 54), and rage. Writing provides the space for us to talk back and to address our oppressors in a way that otherwise would be virtually impossible—not because opportunities are not taken or "granted," but because there is so much "noise" and "interference" between



the messenger and the receiver that we are hardly ever heard. Those things the writer "cannot" say either because she is embroiled in fear or because *she* will not be heard, her characters can say. Her characters can surmise, speculate, and examine in detail the problems of being an African woman, name her oppressors, castigate them, and even murder them without being silenced. Moreover, the writer's anger is sometimes so overwhelming that her message can be overpowering in the confrontation. Audre Lorde speaks of being forced into silence because of rage, but in *A Small Place*, Jamaica Kincaid speaks of the driving need to burn down banks (symbols of white presence and dominance in her small island home) as the only true expression of her rage (26). This type of rage is dangerous and counterproductive because the real message gets lost, and as a result, another Black woman gets locked away not for being crazy or for expressing her rage but for being a criminal. This criminal act and the one described by Lorde in "Power" do no justice, very little good in explaining what Black women go through from day to day.

Similar to Ba, bell hooks encourages the "colonized mind to think of the imagination as the instrument that does not estrange us from reality, but returns us to the real more fully, in ways that help us confront and cope."

"This," she argues, "is a liberatory gesture" (*Critical Fictions* 55).

Africana women across the Diaspora are engaged in a mad work, a maddening work to tear down the walls of oppression that cage us in—racism, sexism, patriarchy, capitalist greed, heterosexism, heteropatriarchy, colonialism, and imperialism—in the various forms in which they reveal themselves. What makes the work maddening is that no matter how hard we work, there is still so much work ahead that it seems we are always at the beginning of our struggle against oppression. Our work seems a steady, repetitive revolution that can best be explained through Grace Nichols' poem "Days That Fell" which powerfully illustrates the hopelessness of a solitary woman in the face of the destruction and death of our dreams:

And yet. . . .

And yet. . . .

the cutlass in her hand  
could not cut through  
the days that fell  
like bramble

and the destruction that  
threatened to choke  
within

as she leaned closer to  
the earth  
seeking some truth  
unarmed against the noon  
We must hold fast to dreams

We must be patient  
 from the crouching of those huts  
 from the sprouting of these fields  
 We can emerge

all revolutions are rooted in dreams

And yet. . . .  
 And yet. . . .  
 the cutlass in her hand  
 could not cut through  
 the days that fell  
 like bramble

and the destruction that  
 threatened to choke within

as she leaned close to  
 the earth  
 seeking some truth  
 unarmed against the noon

Nichols uses the rural situation and imagery-taking care of crops, removing brambles, keeping careful watch for destructive weeds—to illustrate the driving, repetitive work of undoing oppression. While the woman works fervently, steadily, and rhythmically against time and the brutality of the elements, to little or no avail, day falls and falls again, and her work remains incomplete. The solitary woman becomes a collective and despite the imminent destruction or failure, "we" must hold fast to our dreams and be patient—for revolutions are rooted in dreams. Revolutions are also rooted in the mundane, every day experiences, such as harvesting. "And yet" we have so much

to do with so few resources at our disposal. Time marches on.

Nichols' poem is just one work which subtly underscores the impending destruction that Africana women are forced to "choke back" as we work toward change. The walls and barriers Africana women collectively face and the anger, frenzy, and madness that ensue, can perhaps be understood through three literary *moments*—the "wall scene" in Gloria Naylor's novel *The Women of Brewster Place*, Yemoja's speech ritual in Osonye Tess Onwueme's play *Tell It to Women*, and the embrace scene in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy*. I am not using this chapter to analyze these texts, but am using summation of a section of these texts to discuss Black women's anger as it relates to the chapter discussions that follow.

Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* is a novel about seven African American women functioning in a survival community. These women are "hard-edged, soft-centered, brutally demanding, and easily pleased" (5). The women live on Brewster Place, a lower-income urban neighborhood—which has its own history of change and survival separate from its current occupants—and is cut off from the rest of the world by a brick wall that reaches "just above the second floor apartments" (7). This wall—

initially built to protect the greed and investments of merchants and politicians—like Brewster Place itself, secludes, separates, hides and limits them. Although the wall also “protects” them from the greed and humiliation of the uncaring world beyond Brewster Place, no one or no thing can survive when it is sure to meet a dead end, instead of an endless road with twists and turns. That dead end can be the cause of certain madness when all of the possibilities of individuals must be contained within the four corners allotted with no means of escape or release. Thus the wall makes Brewster Place a living hell and a prison for some. The wall must come down. And on Brewster Place it does. After errant teenagers brutally rape Lorraine, and she in desperation and rage murders her friend, the old man Ben, at the wall, the remaining six women of Brewster Place tear down the wall which blocks their view and blocks them from view. Brick by brick, with their bare hands the women of Brewster Place pass the wall on and on and on from hand to hand straight out of Brewster Place and onto the open avenue. While the men and children “huddled in doorways,” the women of Brewster Place removed bricks literally and figuratively stained with blood from Brewster Place:

Women flung themselves against the wall, chipping away at it with knives, plastic forks, spiked shoe heels, and even bare hands; the water pouring under their chins, plastering their blouses and dresses against their breasts and into the cracks of their hips. The bricks piled up behind them and were snatched and relayed out of Brewster Place past over-turned tables, scattered coins, and crushed wads of dollar bills. They came back with chairs and barbecue grills and smashed them into the wall. The "Today Brewster Place-Tomorrow America" banner had been beaten into long strands of red and gold that clung to the wet arms and faces of the women. (Naylor 186)

Tess Onwueme's *Tell It to Women* is an "epic drama for women" which outlines the problematics of defining African feminisms as well as the class conflict involved in forming a feminist politics and agenda. The drama unveils the gaps between "modern" Western-educated African women of the city and the traditional, uneducated women of the rural areas. It also reveals the prejudices and preconceptions of educated women that rural women do not know or understand their oppression. The educated, elite women, Ruth and Daisy, attempt to silence and use the rural women through the Better Life for Rural Women Program (BLRW) to elevate their status in the eyes of government leaders who imitate Westerners. The educated women wish to dispense with tradition—confusing tradition with traditionalism which is static—while the rural women want to add the new ways and

conveniences to the traditional ways and forge a higher wisdom and vision for African women and men.

The climax of the drama comes at the very end with the launching of the BLRW Program. Whereas Daisy and Ruth teach Yemoja, the designated leader and speaker for the rural women, a marching step to the beat of a Western anthem, Yemoja modifies the step until the rural women incorporate their traditional dance with the march. Furthermore, they involve Daisy's 10-year old daughter, Bose by making her the symbol for the "new yam," a designation that points to future productivity and prosperity, a declaration of oneness in and protection through the Earth Mother. Daisy and Ruth, already discomfited by the march and Yemoja's tradition and woman-affirming speech rush out of their seats in the honored section to rescue Bose from being poisoned by these women of Idu, the culture out of which she comes. Their mad rush toward the center comes just as the ritual dance becomes a frenzied exorcism of Western ideals and impositions on their values as a people. The dance celebration ends in the symbolic death of Adaku, the vocal mother of the clan, most persistent in her resistance to these new Western ways, and the serious injury of Ruth, the modern, elite, lesbian feminist scholar who imitates the West. The women

of Idu insists that they do have power—the Daughters of Idu and the marketplace are both ruled by women, and no man dare enter those spaces with motives of authority. Thus they question the modernized women's motives and definitions of authority and power. They are angered by the treatment given them by these modern women who feign having their best interest at heart. They are angered because they do not have access to modern conveniences—not money or even power, but the basic conveniences of living.

"The Plums," the second section of Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy*, revolves around the developing relationship of Sissie, a Ghanaian studying in Germany through an exchange program, and Marija, a German *hausfrau* whom Our Sister meets on her first day in Germany. The two women meet every day and spend time in Marija's home to the point that neighbors become suspicious about the relationship. Each meeting ends with Marija sending Sissie back to her lodging with bags of fruit. That Marija is intrigued by Sissie's "otherness" becomes evident in their first encounter when she immediately asks if Sissie is an Indian. She then proceeds to tell Sissie about the two Indian grocers whom she liked "weri much" (20). The relationship mainly consists of daily visits between the two women with Marija asking Sissie many questions, which Sissie answers.



Marija's fascination with difference increases so that she, a married European woman with a small child,<sup>2</sup> attempts to consummate the relationship with the African woman.

Sissie felt Marija's cold fingers on her breast. The fingers of Marija's hand touched the skin of Sissie's breast while her other hand groped round and round Sissie's midriff, searching for something to hold on to.

It was the left hand that woke her up to the reality of Marija's embrace. The warmth of her tears on her neck. The hotness of her lips against hers.

As one does from a bad dream, impulsively, Sissie shook herself free. With too much effort, unnecessarily, so that she unintentionally hit Marija on the right cheek with the back of her right hand.

It all happened within a second. Two people staring at one another. Two mouths wide open with disbelief. (64)

The authors illustrate the complexities and help us understand the spectrum of experience in Africana women's lives and politics. For instance, often when we speak of feminisms we are speaking through the narrow frame of middle-class women with an education, but these literary experiences show us that oppression is not limited to "educated women" (whom many believe are the only ones who know they are oppressed). These works remind us of the women many believe have no voice in defining feminist praxis, but who, in many places, are the very women who are

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<sup>2</sup>Ironically both the husband and child are named Adolf, which brings to mind Adolf Hitler and all with which his name is associated.

holding up the banner of feminism in their various communities. They get the work of undoing oppression done through grass roots organizations which focus on resolving issues surrounding women's and communities' material rather than on 'theoretical' needs. The texts place Black women where they have often done the most important work: in the fields, in the home and communities, providing sisterhood, kinship ties, and sustenance for their own families as well as others.

The anger illustrated in the *Brewster Place* and in the frenzied ritual of Yemoja and the women of Idu is stirred up in the repetitious and ceaseless work of undoing oppression described in Nichols' poem cited earlier. The three scenarios provide a blueprint for understanding Africana women's anger and outline causes of our silence and anger—male systems of domination, systemic oppression, forced silence, and other women.

In literary texts, limitations imposed might be presented as a brick wall, plums, and unyielding crop or an impotent cutlass, but in Black women's real lives limitations range from glass ceiling politics to not having access to government funds, clean, running water, and to cultural demands on our time and bodies. The everyday lives of Black women are spent breaking down walls and show

that the oppression does not simply exist in the classroom, in literary theories, or in feminist readers. That oppression creeps into our daily lives and affects how we wash our clothes, plow our fields, train our daughters, what we eat, and how we relate to each other.

One of the most obvious links among Black women of all cultures is that we sometimes experience in hooks' terms "a politics of domination that disenables" (*Critical Fictions* 54) or limits our role and function in our own communities and society-at-large. In this regard, there is often little distinction between a woman who is part of the intellectual "elite" and a woman who is part of the rural or uneducated "masses." What is often overlooked is the "strength in numbers" potential of the "uneducated" general populace of women, and the intelligence and common sense of the uneducated women, clearly demonstrated by the educated versus rural women in Owueme's play.

#### Hitting the Wall

Typically anger is considered the territory of Black men. Society tends to leave Black women to their anger, but finds Black male anger threatening; therefore, the prisons are full of "angry Black men" who pose a threat to white people's comfort. Black men are seen as endangered

as if they are an animal species on the edge of extinction and they must protect their lives at all cost, even if it means taking another life. The "colonial fantasy" that Black men are obviously always up to no good, makes us lock our doors, clutch our purses, step up our pace when we see them coming. Because of the attention to Black male rage, there has been no place for Black women's rage to go.

bell hooks reports that she

was frightened by the kind of 'construction of difference' that makes it appear that there is some space of rage and anger that *men* inhabit that is alien to us *women* [. . .]. It's easy to slip into imagining that those are 'male' spaces, rather than ask the question—What do we as *women* do with our rage? (*Angry Women* 80)

Often, we force our rage into silence. Living with this rage takes an admirable amount of fortitude and personal power. Anger with no outlet can consume us and eat away our ability to act on behalf of ourselves. It has no place to go or to unleash its furor, so it festers and consumes not others but ourselves. It is debilitating because in certain unexpected moments of racism and sexism anger is so "consuming" that it leaves us without speech, or even when speech comes we know we cannot always be heard. Since our audience will not hear us, our speech merely stokes the flames.

bell hooks points out, "Basically in white culture

Black women get to play two roles. We are either the bad girls, the bitches, the madwomen . . . seen as threatening and treated badly, or we are the supermamas, telling it like it is and taking care of everybody, spreading our magic wherever we go" (91). Either way, considering us outspoken and confrontational seems to justify their refusal to hear us or to take our anger seriously.

Whereas Black women in America are seen as confrontational bitches, Black women in the Caribbean and Africa are seen as traitors for speaking up and acting on their rights as human beings. Africana feminisms complicate matters even further; for the various "brands" of Africana feminisms and the critical practices of Africana feminisms embrace women of all walks of life and are supported by a fierce attempt to prove that we are still committed to Black men and loyal to all our race concerns. Inherent in this loyalty is adherence to the claim that we are not feminists in the same way white women are feminists—out of a need for social and political equality. While these are part of our platform, we are feminists out of a need for survival and because we have always been so. The ugly realities of slavery and the psychological consequences of racism in the Americas and imperial and colonial politics in Africa and the Caribbean

have compelled Black women to break from European and American feminist models and to forge alternative strategies for our feminist practices. This does not mean that no Black women find a home in Euro-American feminisms nor does it mean that we are all the same. On the contrary, sometimes cultural, sexual, and class differences outweigh our similarities. We are further segregated by some Black women who do not embrace the campaign for women's rights because they feel it pushes down further Black men who are already ENDANGERED and oppressed.<sup>3</sup>

Here in America, African American women struggle against the limitations placed on us by a feminist movement which marginalizes, tokenizes, commodifies, and ghettoizes us. We have had to forge separate agendas for Black women's health care and welfare in this country. What has often doubled the burden of our struggle here in the U.S. is that we must undo and tear down centuries old stereotypes surrounding Black women's sexuality and character that permeate other areas of our lives and also limit access for us. Women in Africa and the Caribbean fight against patriarchal structures that limit access to education and protection under the law. Men are routinely

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<sup>3</sup> The problem arises because these women believe that feminism = Black women above Black men...while for many Black men racial equality means that he is on the same level as white men—above his women.

and ritually abusive in the name of culture. While for Black women speaking up for ourselves is the most natural response to oppression, to others—outsiders—our speech is often tantamount to craziness. However, it is the silence—the battle taking place within, the repression of our anger—that makes us crazy.

The prescription for true womanhood is not confined to British or American women of the nineteenth century. Indeed, these ideas are played out in Africana World realities also. Black women are often defined in opposition to a mythologized ideal of the perfect white mother and wife that took root in the nineteenth century. The idea that a real African woman marries, keeps house, and contributes sons to her community (and in some tribes, add virginal) is not so far from nineteenth-century ideas about virtue and women. It is often ideas such as these that have limited women's roles in community struggle or have confined roles to supporting the nationalist movement. Thus, Africana women's movements in the U.S., the Caribbean, and in Africa have long been fettered by nationalist concerns. In fact, most Black women's movements grew out of and organized around the Anti-Slavery and Civil Rights Movements of the United States and anti-colonialist or nationalist movements abroad. (Women's

roles in these movements were often limited to service to men who served the nation). Women in these regions split over the issue, calling into question loyalty to race and gender as if the two forms of oppression can be equally divided among race and gender lines. Often, women who have firmly committed themselves to one category over another have sacrificed gender struggles and gains for race struggles and gains. In most communities, struggles against repressive regimes cause gender matters to be pushed aside for nationalist concerns.

Part of our crisis revolves around being asked to wage a war against one aspect of our oppression; this is often represented in the fiction of Africana women as creating a psychological and sometimes physical conundrum.

The psychological fix is likely complicated by current debates over wearing of the veil, female circumcision, and polygamy; these complications are themselves further complicated by the "apparent complicity" of some women. If these items are symbols of women's oppression, why do some women not only willingly submit but also fight for retaining these traditions. While fear of retribution if one fails to comply and the belief that there is nothing wrong or oppressive about such practices contribute to women's acceptance of these practices, the reality is that



many of the cultures in which these things are practiced, are confronted with colonial imposition and displacement and face cultural annihilation on many different levels. This occurs to the point that many women feel that their participation is vital to keeping the culture alive and for preventing its being subsumed by European culture and "contamination." As usual, these issues find their place in literature.

We often see and name white males as the perpetrators of violence and oppression, but Black women have been assaulted, denied, and minimized on all fronts. It has been painful that we could not rely on our husbands, our brothers, our fathers to band with us, and most painful—sometimes debilitating—that we could not rely on our other sisters.

The assault on Black women by white feminists in refusing to acknowledge our womanhood or their particular forms of oppression is just another part of the "crisis" which turn-of-the-century feminist thinker, Anna Julia Cooper, suggests is being a "Black woman." Citation On all sides Black women are hemmed in—by the socialization of a white male patriarchy; by continued devaluation of our womanhood through the tenets of this patriarchy; by Black men rendered powerless by whips, chains, rape (of Black

women), the denial of "family" and manhood (by this powerlessness unable to "defend and protect" Black womanhood as white men sought to protect the "sanctity" and "purity" of white womanhood)<sup>4</sup>; but especially by the status of sub-woman or non-woman.

This is our crisis. And too much contemplation of this crisis without finally grasping its "deep significance" or without realizing that the "heritage unique in the ages" is something that can redeem rather than crush can lead one to certain insanity. Many a woman, unable to harmonize the inconsistencies in her chaotic world, has found herself on the other side of "normality," trying desperately to communicate what she could not through sanity. Being a Black woman is an arduous assignment, being linked to the "heritage unique in the ages" with its multiplicity of forces operating is back-breaking work. One must be armed for battle at all times. This is the part of experience that is virtually absent from many studies of Africana women that are not written by us. Thus Africana women have had to contribute our own voices and try to articulate the experience from our perspectives. When (in 1974) Michelle Wallace penned the

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<sup>4</sup> Of course this has other implications, but that's another topic altogether—I think.

words cited earlier, "Being a Black woman means frequent spells of impotent, self-consuming rage" (225), she was referring to a rage that has the capacity to at once debilitate and empower, but empowerment is bred through speech. Black women must journey to the fringes of (in this case, perceived) madness and step over into it to "receive power."

The revolution goes on—despite limitations, despite the fact that there is no end in sight.

#### (Un)Common Ears: Breaking Silences and Speaking Madness

Many (Black men, white men and women) up and down the hierarchical construct of the Western world or the varied constructs of the Caribbean and Africa have problems with Black women writing or speaking about our pain, and our anger over the inequities, etc. So, then, there comes a certain degree of madness with the act of speaking up and sounding out. But this is a perceived madness. I have often heard phrases such as "she has too much learning" or "those books have gone to her head": meaning, her education has affected her ability to act sensibly and use common sense. These complaints apply to Black women who challenge the status quo, question the way things are, and the notion that "we" have a place that we are confined to

whereas "they" do not. Those sentiments sometimes come from people within our own culture. From outside the culture come people who do not expect us to speak articulately, so they dismiss our claims to try to make us think everything is all in our minds; in so doing, they seek to silence and eliminate us.

The thing that makes Black women's rage so threatening to others is the fact that this is often articulated through speech, is often rechanneled or used to mobilize Black women to forge an oppositional strategy for Black women's empowerment. When this anger is transformed into speech it is perceived as madness because like children, (Black) women are to be seen and not heard. Any attempt to speak "out of turn" or outside the narrow confines handed us stirs up trouble and to onlookers we are "crazy." Perhaps what I am speaking of can be understood through Alice Walker's character, Sophie, in *The Color Purple*. Sophie, self-possessed and independent, does not live a life of ease. She fights most of her life against oppression in her home, but when the mayor's wife compliments her on the cleanliness of her children and overzealously asks Sophie to be her maid, Sophie "loses it" and slaps the woman. Sophie "speaks" her anger—a cultural taboo for Blacks in the 1940's. We do not backtalk whites.

For this, Sophie's speech is interpreted as madness by others, because after all, we should get through this life with as little pain possible. Sophie's slap across the woman's face symbolizes her rejection of the stereotypical image of the Black woman as the white woman's maid/slave. Her revelation of her anger is the sanest thing she can do at that moment. Thus, her real madness begins when she is silenced, when she is forced to house or harbor an anger that is too big for even her generous frame. She regains herself when she can speak again, but her (home)coming to speech reveals that no matter how "righteous" or well deserved, our anger always costs us something. There is usually a loss for us and speaking is always a risk and a transgression.

Yemoja's internal speech and her attempts to speak in the earlier parts of *Tell It to Women* demonstrate that the problem with the constructive use of our anger is that people hardly ever want to hear about it and that the places we can speak our rage and have it understood are going to be different. Ruth and Daisy, who have completely immersed themselves in a Western feminist framework, cannot hear the women of Idu or their insistence that they are well aware of their needs and that they trust Yemoja will see that they are met. They do not understand that Western

definitions of feminism and these women's needs are divergent—Ruth and Daisy emphasize women's autonomy and authority over men while the women of Idu insist that their needs are more material and primarily involve the physical welfare of the entire community. The women of Idu insist that they do have power within spheres that matter to them—the marketplace, the home, and the Daughters of Idu—but because of Ruth's and Daisy's particular politics the Idu men do not hear the Idu women either. For them, feminism is a completely Western concept and Ruth and Daisy use it to corrupt their women. As far as the men are concerned, feminism is anti-tradition, anti-community, anti-African, and anti-male. While Ruth and Daisy seek to silence the women with their big words and European education, the men of Idu seek to silence the women through sheer force. The men are furious that the women are speaking up—this betrayal is tantamount to madness. Ironically, until the end of the drama, the Idu women do not speak to the men or to Ruth and Daisy at all. It is only when Yemoja has a group of people—the Idu women—who understand the language of her anger, of her experience that she can speak through anger and have it perceived as sane.

Likewise, the exchanges between Marija and Sissie are merely punctuated by Sissie's cultural explanations.

Marija uses Sissie to fill her emptiness as a lonely German housewife. She imposes her views on Sissie, but Sissie shakes herself free and through the slap talks back. Sissie is not the only one jolted (back) into reality.

Black women's speech is considered madness because through it we convey the sense that Black women cannot trust those who seek alliances. Though it is popular and acceptable to claim, white men are not the only perpetrators of violence to her psyche. In many ways Black men and white women have been just as oppressive. While white women claim to be sisters in oppression with Black women, the reality is that white women have benefited and continue to benefit from the labor and subjugation of Black women. Although white women seek to form alliances, many of them ignore those nasty, pesky categories of race and class. They oppress us through constructions firmly embedded in their own psyches and look to Black women to redeem them from the abyss of racism. It is oppressive and maddening to be the one Black friend to many white women.

Jo Carillo's poem, "And When You Leave, Take Your Pictures with You" captures the disturbing conflict between construction and reality.

Our white sisters  
radical friends  
love to own pictures of us

sitting at a factory machine  
 wielding a machete  
 in our bright bandannas  
 holding brown yellow Black red children  
 reading books from literacy campaigns  
 holding machine guns bayonets bombs knives  
 Our white sisters  
 radical friends  
 should think again.  
 Our white sisters  
 radical friends  
 love tow own pictures of us  
 walking to the fields in the hot sun  
 with straw hat on head if brown  
 bandanna if Black  
 in bright embroidered skirts  
 holding brown yellow Black red children  
 reading books from literacy campaigns  
 smiling.  
 Our white sisters radical friends  
 should think again.  
 No one smiles  
 at the beginning of a day spent  
 digging for souvenir chunks of uranium  
 of cleaning up after  
 our white sisters  
 radical friends

And when our white sisters  
 radical friends see us

in the flesh  
 not as a picture they own,  
 they are not quite as sure  
 if  
 they like us as much  
 We are not as happy as we look  
 on  
 their  
 wall

Carillo's poem demonstrates that white women sometimes see  
 us through lenses that focus on our external actions, on  
 what they see through a biased frame or what we allow them



to see from moment to moment. They confuse our "doing what we have to do" with happiness. However, when Black women speak of anger and frustration and from positions of power, white women are disturbed. We are not what they expect. They are "thrown off" when Black women "talk back" openly, honestly, and indignantly.

Often Black women are expected to reside in certain spaces, and when we step outside of the lens' eye and reveal not contentment, but anger, the palatable image fades. Ellen Pence in recounting her experience with examining her own racism writes: "I viewed the anger of women of color toward my white sisters as a cop out . . . We listened and tried to adjust . . . We are the most aggressively confronted (45). Pence's early response to Black women's anger over an exclusionary feminism reveals that white women have ignored their participation in keeping Black women in a position of subjugation. Instead, they expect Black women to consider male systems of domination the problem when the (fe)male systems of domination have been just as tormenting. The continuation of her statement reveals that they, Pence's white sisters, were part of the systems of domination operating: "As white women we continually expected women of color to bring us to an understanding of our own racism." She further

questions: "Why do we call upon those who have suffered the injustice of that history to explain it to us?" (45, 46).

Circumstances such as this-being called upon to explain our victimization-brings us to the point of what Davies describes as the "eloquent silence" reached when "many black women have spoken incessantly without being heard," when they "reach the point where they say nothing verbally and instead operate from a silence which often speaks eloquently" (3). Such silence, brought on by silencing and being silent, is a strategy for resistance and empowerment.

The most potent tool Africana women have used for resistance has been our texts. Through the texts Africana women tear down old constructions and rebuild an authentic structure, built with our own stories. All too often these stories have come, not at the cost of our sanity as theorized about nineteenth century white women's texts, but through our ire and through our madness.

### CHAPTER 3

#### "GO EENA KUMBLA": MADNESS AS ALTERNATIVE SURVIVAL STRATEGY

*When a body senses pain or danger or uncertainty, it seeks protection.*

*Erna Brodber, Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*

As an Africana experience, madness—usually defined as an internal force—is a part of everyday life, seen not so much as an aberration as a personal inner conflict caused by external forces. The distinction between madness as an Africana experience and as a Western condition is clearly exemplified by the three texts to be discussed in this chapter: Erna Brodber's *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*, Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*, and Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*.<sup>1</sup> When studied collectively the three texts, contrary to Western theories of madness, theorize madness as a tool for survival. While some critics sneer at the soundness of personal and fictive experience as cogent forms of theory, Brodber, a social scientist, wrote her first novel, *Jane*, as theory, while she was working through what she saw as inadequacies in

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<sup>1</sup> These texts will be abbreviated as follows: *Jane*, *Question*, and *Funnyhouse*

theoretical practices already in place. She originally wrote *Jane* as a case study for her students because she had grown weary with a "social science methodology devoted to 'objectivity' and therefore distancing the researcher from the people and spurning the researched" (*Fiction in Scientific Procedure* 165). She adds:

My examination of Jamaican society...had to incorporate my "I" and be presented in such a way that the social workers I was training saw their own "I" in the work, making this culture-in-personality study a personal and possibly transforming work of the therapist and through them the clients with whom they would work. (166)

*Jane* is the instrument through which Brodber examined the development of personality through culture and the development of cultural identity in an already "constructed" personality. Through *Jane*, Brodber examines the relationship between history, tradition, and defense mechanisms.

The three divergent concepts—history, tradition, and defense mechanisms—come together very gracefully in the novel and take on the form of the kumbla or form the kumbla metaphor. The kumbla is adopted from the Afro-Caribbean story of the trickster Spiderman Anancy<sup>2</sup>, his son Tucuma, and Dryhead the Sea King.

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<sup>2</sup> Also spelled, "Anansi" or "Ananse". The stories of Brer Anancy are part of the oral tradition of Africa and her Diaspora. These stories

The "Anancy Story" is a type of tale told and sung throughout the Caribbean. During the period of slavery, Asanti slaves from the African Gold Coast brought the narrative form to the Caribbean. These original tales were interspersed with song, and depicted a wily spider character that used his wits and cunning to survive.

In the Anancy tale, Anancy and his son Tucuma, led by the deceptive Firefly, venture into the Sea King's territory and know they will be punished for it. Realizing Firefly's deception, Anancy devises a plan to spare their lives. He tells the Sea King as retribution, he will give him all of his sons in exchange for his own freedom: Tucuma is Anancy's only son. To fool the king, Anancy tells his "sons" to come out one at a time to be introduced to the Sea King. This is not so difficult since Firefly, the king's guard, has many eyes and is too prideful to reveal his physical "defect" to Anancy. He convinces himself that he does see one son enter as another leaves. After the introduction of each son, Anancy, repeats the phrase, "you face fava, go eena kumbla," which to Dryhead and his court means get out of my sight; you sicken me and "was a bad word that only a man so torn with grief could

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have come to represent the ability of Africans to outwit their "enemies" and survive despite the odds against them.

utter to his child." This is in fact Anancy's cue to his son to change disguises. After a number of "sons" goes before the Sea King, Anancy asks to keep the last son. Dryhead assents and Anancy and Tucuma escape to freedom (Brodber 123-130).

The use of the Anancy tale points to the alternative strategies for survival Africana people have always used to ensure their continued existence. This Anancy tale is particularly significant—outside of Anancy's own trickster moves—because it provides instruction for continued mental and physical survival. Anancy's words, "you face fava" means literally, your face favors a change. In other words, change your appearance—take cover and find protection. Anancy further instructs, "Go eena kumbla." He is the master of kumblas. He "crafts such finely woven white silk kumblas designed to protect for generations" (130). His instruction—"go eena kumbla"—anticipates Caribbean culture in a number of ways: Like Anancy himself, the kumbla is clearly a signifier of Afro-Caribbean culture and history. Literally, a kumbla is a calabash or gourd used to store food; it has also been used as and to make instruments. In Brodber's analysis, "it is a round seamless calabash that protects you without caring" (Jane 123). "It is a beach ball that bounces with the sea

but never goes down. It never stoops to fight . . . It makes no demands[ . . . ] will not crack[ . . . ]will not open unless you rip its seam open [ . . . and] only you pull the cord to rip the seams" (130). The narrative also points out that the "trouble with the kumbla is getting out of the kumbla. If you dwell too long in it, it makes you delicate." The kumbla, or protective covering represents a degree of safety, but it is a type of safety that is alienating and maddening if never abandoned. In the Anancy tale, the kumbla protects the identity of the son, Tucuma, and thus saves his life. In a broader view the kumbla is symbolic of the circumstances of the Afro-Caribbean woman-empowered yet constrained, limited by cultural expectations and reality as well as sexuality and gender issues.

In this chapter, I examine madness in terms of this kumbla metaphor. Through Brodber's description of the kumbla, I have come to the conclusion that women characters embrace madness as a survival strategy; therefore, madness itself can be a kumbla, protective armor that prevents the mind from going too far in turning against itself or from attacking the physical being of the woman. Here, I compare and contrast the use of madness as a survival strategy or a kumbla in which the three primary characters dwell until they can become "strong enough" to cope with their

realities. This seems "risky business"—not simply because the texts and authors are from three diverse geographical spaces, but because 1) the kumbla metaphor is clearly part of the Afro-Caribbean experience; 2) the range of the characters' mental frailties and madness is very broad; 3) and since I am defining madness as a kumbla in the three texts, it is tempting to assume that all madness is a kumbla or at the very least, that madness is always a kumbla in Africana women's texts.

The first of these textual issues is easily resolved. The Anancy tales, out of which the kumbla comes, linked to Africa, is also very much a part of the African American oral tradition. The kumbla, or calabash, points to this tradition and is symbolic of its stable and stabilizing properties—particularly as it points to domesticity with which African women in America have always been associated. Secondly, although the characters' madness range from mild to severe, there are enough connections between the texts to make this a viable study: as we examine the texts we shall see that each woman is a victim of her own fear and denial; each is oppressed by her own perceptions of her community and her sexuality; and each takes refuge in madness to protect her from perceptions of the real—even as she works toward coping with the real more fully. Other



novels I deal with in this project do not present madness as a protective covering from which a woman might emerge whole. In the novels in other chapters madness is a manifestation of errant anger (chapter 2), a voice of reason in societal madness (chapter 4), and a conscientious choice or the last resort after all other possibilities have been exhausted (chapter 5). On some level, in all of the novels madness is a kumbla, but it is in the three novels discussed here that this definition emerges with unrivaled clarity.

The idea of madness as a kumbla seems bizarre to readers, I am sure, but even as we turn to the basic principles of psychology we learn that individuals use defense mechanisms as a means to protect themselves from disturbing and destructive thoughts and tendencies. In Western theories neuroses and psychoses evolve on some basic levels when the irrational, raw instinct or impulse to protect oneself at all costs becomes overgrown and obsessive. So in Africana novels, a woman can weave madness—a kumbla—to ensure the psychical and physical survival of the psychologically wounded. Because of our histories of oppression in slavery, colonization, and (post) colonization, Africana women have always found

alternative means of survival and protection.<sup>3</sup> The kumbla madness<sup>4</sup> encloses the individual woman and holds her together in its protective covering, but even within this kumbla she is able to turn inwards and find "that the center of herself is still sane and secure" (Head 55).

Madness, like a kumbla, functions as an intermediary state between the sane and the insane, between fragmentation, dissolution, and wholeness, between self-hatred and self-love, between chauvinism and universal love, between good and evil. In short, madness as a kumbla is a psychological purgatory. While in this neither-here-nor-there place, protagonists are protected primarily when they embrace their madness and allow themselves to look within and take a soul journey, while keeping an eye on the physical world outside themselves.

In Jane Nellie laments that Br'er Anancy leaves her only the advice to go into the kumbla, but she does not realize that he also counsels her on how to get into, live in, and return to life when she comes out of the kumbla. Ever the protector and teacher of his children, Anancy advises Tucuma to never look to anyone else for direction:

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<sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive overview of these survival imperatives see Filomena Chioma Steady's *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally*, Schenkman Books, Inc., 1981

<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise noted, from this point on, use of the word "kumbla" refers to madness.

Don't follow no firefly boy. Look inside yourself and row. Them will los' you. Them will put you out of your way...But when you find out where you want to go watch for them other one what going there and you use their light. (124)

Erna Brodber's *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* (1982), South African novelist Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* (1974), and African-American playwright Adrienne Kennedy's one-act play, *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1962)<sup>5</sup> all make madness as a kumbla clearer. All of the primary characters find themselves in circumstances that require the protection of the kumbla.

*Jane* is a novel that employs the Afro-Caribbean culture to lead us through Nellie's cultural and sexual repression all the way to her liberation and wholeness. The story of Nellie's movement from fragmentation to wholeness is framed by a European (English) children's ring game and the tale of Anancy's tricking the Sea King. Even upon a second reading of the novel, it is not so easy to discern that the novel is about a young woman who has a nervous breakdown and puts her life back together again by taking the fragments, examining them and finding the connections among them—finding the associations between her own life and the lives of her relations and the

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<sup>5</sup> *Question of Power* will be abbreviated as *Question* and *Funnyhouse of a Negro* will be abbreviated *Funnyhouse*.

relationship between her family and the history of her homeplace. Nellie's retreat to the kumbula or madness results from an inability to harmonize learned middle class values, mass cultural values, and the very real fact of her femaleness and vulnerability. Nellie's psychological disjuncture is represented by two segments of her family history, Aunts Becca and Alice. Aunt Becca, the relative who rears Nellie during her teen years and preaches disconnection from Caribbean identity, is bent on class, status, and material gain while Aunt Alice, the female relative who never gets her period, becomes her savior. (But then, we are reminded that she is not properly female and never has to deal with the fragility or exposure through pregnancy of her own sexuality. She is also described as "not right in the head," so she does not share the concerns of Aunt Becca. It is exactly because Aunt Alice is not plagued with the bane of femaleness that she can rescue Nellie. She is not burdened with concerns of illegitimate children and female sexuality).

Because the novel is certainly non-linear-written in four often repetitive parts framed by segments of the ring game-each making the story progressively more coherent-it is difficult to summarize. Fragments of memories plague Nellie as she nests in the kumbula. These fragments

include: her eighth-year Easter-birthday gifts, the extra dress and the beautiful straw purse which she wanted but which became her undoing because it demonstrated her dislocation from the other children who did not receive one new dress let alone two; Bubba Ruddock, her childhood friend, who could no longer play with her as her body began to mature and who later also rescues her from the kumbla; Aunt Becca's obsession with class and racial and sexual (un)consciousness; Aunt Alice, the rescuer; her education in the U.S.; her U.S. political involvement which she engages in only to feel as if she is a real part of a Black community; her lover; fragments of family history and ancestral relations as they were told to her.

The Anancy tale and the ring game, which serves as section titles (My dear will you allow me/to waltz with you/into this beautiful garden. /Jane and Louisa will soon come home), promise readers both a journey into consciousness and a homecoming.<sup>6</sup> Through her use of the British-derived ring game, given an Afro-Caribbean spirit, and the Anancy tale, Brodber calls attention to an Afri-centered socialization, tradition, and history, characterized by dual cultural identities, informed by

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<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Nellie lives in a virtual garden—even the sun can't get through the lush green.

colonization. Thus she writes about a particular Africana brand of madness and fragmentation as opposed to a generic form which can be easily explained away using European models.

*Question*, slightly more linear, centers on Elizabeth, an exiled South African mother of a small boy now living in Botswana because of her involvement with a banned political party. The story of Elizabeth's madness is told in two parts—each representing the personage, which dominates her two major hallucinations and breakdowns—'Sello' and 'Dan'. Elizabeth's total preoccupation with the idea of universal love and her haunting memories of the overwhelming hatred and violence of white South Africans toward Blacks, as well as her own unstable position as a coloured woman among Blacks, reveal themselves in the form of philosophical discussions with 'Sello' in part one and the unbearable torture of 'Dan' in part two. 'Sello' and 'Dan' are the personages of her hallucinations who respectively counsel and taunt her about her dislocation within the colonial space. Together, they force her not only to confront her dislocation as a coloured person but also her self-perceived limitations and inadequacies as a woman. Much of Elizabeth's story comes through these fantasy sequences of her dealings with 'Dan' and 'Sello'. Elizabeth's dreams

and hallucinations are so extensive and intense that they confine her to her bed for days at a time during a three-year period; sometimes she gets up only to feed her son whom she refers to as the "small boy."

'Sello' comes to her in various forms: 'Sello' in the brown suit; 'Sello' in the priest robe; Medusa; the poor of India; Buddha; and Caligula. Although the base of their relationship is primarily masculine—he speaks to her as he would speak to a man (24)—Sello's role is to comment on her unspoken thoughts. 'Dan' also approaches her in a number of ways: "The Father," a headless woman, the womb, Miss Sewing Machine, 71-woman harem, Miss Wiggly Bottom, and Miss Body Beautiful. "'Dan'" "heightened in himself" the social defects of Africa and set himself up as the epitome of African males, emphasizing a super-insatiable heterosexuality. In accepting 'Dan''s version of reality, Elizabeth cries out, "Oh this filthy environment, where men sleep with the little girls they fathered" (137). 'Dan' reveals the social defects of Africa to lie in the African males' "loose, carefree sexuality," and a "form of cruelty, spite really, that has its origins in witchcraft practices" (137). He also attempts to convince her that Sello, whom she respects as a god, is the ultimate homosexual.

Like Nellie in *Jane and Louisa*, Elizabeth has the burden of reconciling herself to her history and culture and of reconciling herself to reality. Elizabeth's skin color and parental ties place her outside both the colonized and the colonizer societies. She is capable of inwardly battling the ghosts of her reality, but she cannot stand the social, economic, and political division between Blacks and whites (and coloureds and between men and women) and seeks a mutual love in which the two "feed off each other" rather than "one living off the soul of another" (13). It is Elizabeth's inability to cope with her mother's history, South African racism, and her racial makeup which are manifested in 'Dan''s accusations and assaults on her sexuality, his questioning her Africanness, her womanhood, and her fantasy of 'Dan' opening her head and speaking into it that leads her to the kumbula of madness. But Elizabeth's life is troubled before 'Dan' and 'Sello'. Primarily, she is the coloured lovechild of a white girl and the Black stable boy who worked on her parents' land. Elizabeth's mother was assumed insane because of this act and placed in a mental institution. After being shuffled from family to family as a child and finally enrolled in a Mission School, Elizabeth is made aware of this information at 13 and is constantly reminded



that since her mother was insane, she would indeed become insane one day. Elizabeth looks too closely at the images and "truths" 'Dan' flaunts until she finally acts by (1) slapping Mrs. Jones, an older respected woman in the community because 'Dan' convinces her that Mrs. Jones "raises her daughters to be prostitutes" and (2) by scrawling a note to the "real" Sello and posting it to the wall of the post office: "Sello is a filthy pervert who sleeps with his daughter" (173-175). It is only after she posts the note and is placed in a mental hospital for the second time, that Elizabeth begins to find her way out of madness.<sup>7</sup> The novel confronts African female sexuality through invoking stereotypes of African women's sexual avarice and deviance. It also tackles the issue of white hatred for Blacks and their need for dominance and control. It asks, how could Africans allow themselves to be taken advantage of—first in slavery, then through imperialism and colonialism, and currently through economic and social tyranny—so that what is left is a homeless race of people still paddling around with "soft, shuffling, loose-knit personalities" (12)? The novel also does a tremendous job, even if subtle, of exposing white racism—and sicknesses—

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<sup>7</sup> 'Sello' also happens to be an actual person in the Motabeng community who has no relationship to the 'Sello' of her mental ravings. One can see how this can lead to her hospitalization.

that feed off Blacks. Whether the racism is overt or covert (through missionary acts), it still baffles and sends some to shelter themselves in the kumbula.

Elizabeth retreats to madness to work out power issues, issues of good and evil. Dan, Sello, and Medusa inhabit her madness with her and propel her into a hellish struggle between good and evil and questions of power. Indeed, Elizabeth comes to the conclusion that questions of good and evil are questions of power. Elizabeth equates the evils of racism and sexism with greed for power which leads to corrupting power. Power is not simply white, but can also be Black (as she learns in Botswana) and male.

The African American text, *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, is a short play about an African American woman with multiple personality disorder and her conversations with her personalities: Duchess of Hapsburg, Queen Victoria Regina, Jesus, and Patrice Lumumba. Sarah and her personalities repeatedly refer to the Black beast that raped "their" mother, to "their" mother's confinement in an insane asylum and to the bag in which "they" carry the red hair that fell from the crown of "their" heads. Sarah's madness is wrapped up in her inability to harmonize Blackness and whiteness or to find some resolution to the conflicts of race ingrained in American culture. Visually and verbally,

Sarah and her selves express a blatant hatred for Blackness and a veneration of whiteness. Her story is fraught with the contradictions and inconsistencies of one attempting to overcome racial self-hatred. She must also reconcile her racial history with her present. Like Elizabeth's, Sarah's insanity reveals the lies that lay in the subconscious of many people of color. The lie which ultimately consumes Sarah centers around her belief that her father—being a Black man after all—must have raped her "lightest of them all" mother because there could be no sexual union between them otherwise—so he becomes the Black rapist beast, and she his unfortunate offspring.

The defense mechanisms used by these characters range from repression (Nellie), an attempt by the ego to keep undesirable id impulses from reaching consciousness (Ryckman 35) to denial (Elizabeth) to projection (Sarah), to protecting the ego by attributing one's own undesirable characteristics to others (Ryckman 37). These tactics result in a fracturing or fragmenting of the characters' personalities, psyches and memories. The characters develop such defenses against the discrepancies between cultural or familial expectations and who they feel they really are. Sidney Mintz defines culture as a

historically developed form through which members of a group relate to one another. It is a resource for human action, choices, materials, behavior, self-perception, and worldview. Culture is used to confirm, reinforce, maintain, change, or deny particular arrangements of status, power, and identity. (qtd. in Bowles 75)

Without access to or involvement in a cultural community, the characters are without a stable identity. In each case, their identities (being oneself and not another) are informed, socialized, and constructed against European or American identity by other individuals and their politics. All three characters are outside culture because of class, race, skin color, or socialization, but they are not comfortable with this or with their imposed identities. Their discomfort appropriately leads them to try to work this out and when this is no longer psychologically healthy, they choose to dwell in madness.

Jacqueline de Weever, in *Mythmaking and Metaphor*, contends, "When people of a minority culture strive to fully adopt the values and ideals of the dominant culture, their psyches are fractured" (168). Fanon, writing nearly four decades earlier expresses similar sentiments: fragmentation and dissolution are realities of the subjective experience of colonialism. Liberation, both national and individual, involves putting together another

identity, by first recognizing it and then validating it, using it to empower in the struggle against the colonizer" (WE 210). Fanon elaborates more clearly on this phenomenon in "The Fact of Blackness." One is fragmented only when one tries to exist multiply. This is what happens with our characters here. Rather than finding harmony and constructing one multi-faceted personality, our characters seek to wholly exist and benefit both inside and outside culture. When they cannot achieve wholeness with their multiple characters, they retreat to madness. The three characters rest in the kumbla while dealing with issues of alienation: woman-ness and cultural and historical separation from "true" culture and history-making.

These texts are similar in the commentary they make about the circumstances of Africana women that require refuge in the kumbla madness. The discussion will loosely revolve around three pertinent issues as they relate to the characters' madness and housing in the kumbla: sexuality and cultural identification, failed kumblas/madness, and emerging from the kumbla.

At the heart of the madness of the three characters studied in this chapter is the issue of Black [female] sexuality. Though this issue will be examined more closely from another perspective in a later chapter, it is relevant

here because as Pam Mordecai points out, "Nellie's personal crises are all intimately bound up with the fact that she is a woman: her psychic dislocation is a product of spiritual confusion in the community and symbolizes that confusion" (49). The prominence of the Anancy tale and the children's ring game in *Jane* points to this dislocation and confusion in the community. Although framed by "texts" which validate the Caribbean experience, the overriding voice in Nellie's memory decries this experience and suppresses it in exchange for European Victorian values. Sexuality as expressed through the sex act becomes an act of disgrace and shame. The Caribbean character, at least the part of it that is African, is also a source of shame. And what Brodber has made central in the text—the Caribbean "I"—is not central in the lives of Aunt Becca or much of Nellie's family. The fact that sexual experience, as implied by the ring game (waltzing into the beautiful garden), is positioned alongside the protective kumbla also exemplifies the confusion of the community. The section of *Jane* entitled "The Snail in the Kumbla" illustrates Nellie's struggle with these separate but coupled forces. The snail, which attempts to share the space of the kumbla, is sexuality—specifically the Black male sex organ—and menstruation—and it threatens the safety and stability of

the kumbla. The section begins with Nellie's mentally questioning Auntie Becca: how is she to retain sexual purity when there are 800 men and women living in the same compound at the university? The section centers around Nellie's sexual inhibitions and most notably her failure to see the difference between men and women on some basic levels. The onset of her menses introduces her to a world in which men and women are socialized differently and separately. Why do the boys no longer want to play with her when she beats them in games and sports? Why is it now a problem rather than an honored victory? In parts, these childhood questions come to Nellie as she takes shelter in her madness.

According to Aunt Becca, both menstruation and male sexuality, are threats to female sexual purity. Thus, warnings from all sorts of female family members, especially Aunt Becca, come to her, stressing the importance of not shaming the family with an illegitimate pregnancy. On these warnings ride strict instructions in family history and Nellie's place in it, a place, of course that leaves no room for indigenous values. (Aunt Alice who never gets her period is the only aunt who refrains from these warnings; ironically, she is the aunt who "carries" and reproduces the culture in Nellie). As a result,

sexuality and culture are linked and Nellie becomes severely sexually and culturally repressed. It is not until she leaves for college and is studying in the "Sam's Country" (the United States) that she succumbs to sex which she describes as a "long nasty snail" (Brodber 28) a "mekke, mekke thing."<sup>8</sup> But "because you want to be a woman, now have a man." You must "vomit and bear it" (28). The "mekke, mekke" thing is also the menses, the horrible thing which connects her to other women but also changes her concerns from girlhood ones to sexuality, which Aunt Becca vilifies as unclean and even unwomanly. When the snail enters the kumbla, Nellie must then deal with the shame as well as aspects of her cultural personality that have been repressed.

For Elizabeth, sexuality is demonized through 'Dan'. Her conclusions about her own sexuality and the sexuality of Africans are manifest through her 'Dan' hallucinations, a personage with a grotesquely long penis who engages in freakish and obscene sexual acts with numerous "nice time girls" in her presence, on the very bed in which she sleeps. 'Dan' forces Elizabeth to "acknowledge" that Black men sleep with their little daughters. Elizabeth's own

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<sup>8</sup> "Mekke, mekke" means mucous; it is used to describe the consistency of unpalatable food.



estranged husband is not too far from the "truth" 'Dan' advocates, for he had numerous affairs with men and women before Elizabeth took the "small boy," her son, and left South Africa for Botswana. 'Dan' repeatedly assaults her own sexuality. She is told she has no sexuality; she is not a real woman. This is possibly best exemplified through the male voices and identity these personages take, demonstrating that Elizabeth's realities are very much male-centered and identified. Furthermore, once again, we find conflict between sexuality and culture as if the two are synonymous or at least compatible concepts. Like *Jane and Louisa*, *A Question of Power* makes central questions of European superiority and dominance and places them alongside questions of personal power, sexuality, and love.

Sarah's distorted view of Black male sexuality is also telling. In Sarah's hallucinations, her mother is a phantom clad in a white nightgown who carries a bald head and utters: "Black man, Black man, I never should have let a Black man put his hands on me. The wild Black beast raped me and now my skull is shining" (12). And her father is the object of her hatred and part of the reason for her self-hatred because he is Black. While Sarah's mother is clearly not white, Sarah refers to her as the "lightest one" (21). Since Sarah is schooled in the dominant

ideology of white purity and Black bestiality, her father must have raped her mother, and she, the product of the violation, is/was alienated from her mother's love because she is Black like her father. Interestingly, Sarah's boyfriend is white (Jewish) and when one of her selves, Jesus, discovers that his Father is Black and not white, he seeks to kill Patrice Lumumba, one of her other selves. Thus Sarah comes to the same conclusion, that she must kill Jesus, the product of a Black father.

Nellie's, Elizabeth's, and Sarah's madness reveals their misgivings, anxieties, and apprehensions surrounding Black men. However, it is *their* sexuality that is troubled and threatened. Their sexuality is a site of instability because of its histories of devaluation and stereotype. Like Nellie, many women are schooled about their sexuality through warnings against giving it away—basically through negativity. However, the world in which Black women live tells them they are little more than whores. Are these the truths our mothers know? Or have they adopted Eurocentric definitions of propriety? What is it that scares the three characters about Black sexuality to the point that their obsession is revealed in their madness?

Nellie's anxieties about her sexual desires, Elizabeth's fear of becoming sexually adept, and Sarah's

paranoid fantasies all stem from a distrust of the "limits" of Black sexuality. For is not the supposed insanity and suicide of Elizabeth's mother linked to sex with a Black man, or a Black man overstepping his sexual limits? Doesn't Nellie's lover die, even as she continues to deal with sexual repression? Doesn't Sarah believe her father is the Black beast who raped her very fair-skinned mother? In these characters' madnesses rest the snail, the ever-present threat of Black male hyper-sexuality and, of course, the threat of her own hyper-sex drive being revealed. The unexpressed sexual fears must also be worked out through their madness.

It is not only Black male sexuality that is really threatening to a balanced and healthy female psyche, but the production and perpetuation of certain types of cultural, historical, and social hierarchies and constructs through, as mentioned earlier, the union of Black men and women. As women, Nellie, Elizabeth, and Sarah must face the reality that "the world is waiting to drag you down: woman luck de dungle heap" (Brodber 17) and unless one marries up (read: very light or white), "the Black womb is . . . an abominable scrap heap thing" (143). Thus, the snail in the kumbula represents not only sexuality but also the cultural self-hatred that can be disseminated through

sexual union.<sup>9</sup> The threat is tied to racial erasure and genocide and can be found in Sarah's feelings about her father. Sarah's self-hatred comes from the fact of her Blackness; Black male sexuality—her father's specifically—provides the threat of more self-hating Black children trying to come to grips with their Blackness in a white world.

On certain levels, then, the madness they experience is born of all of these maddening facts of life for Africana women, but ironically, it is the very thing that helps them work through these realities.

The paradox surrounding these issues of sexuality is that Black male sexuality is seen as both taboo and talisman: taboo because outside of marriage it leads to "undeserved" pleasure and a woman's ultimate ruin; talisman because it puts a "girl" on the road to "womanhood" and because it is through sexual relations with a man that a woman is socially validated (see Nellie's snail and Elizabeth's situation). Sexuality is a highly prized gift that affords a woman a traditional (read: legitimate) role in Africana societies: In many African societies,

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<sup>9</sup> Black male sexuality = more Black children. And we wish to erase the Blackness and whiten the race if not literally, then culturally.

motherhood defines womanhood. Motherhood, then, is crucial to a woman's status in African societies" (Davies 243).

Of all the images Elizabeth faces, Medusa is the most aggressive and sexually potent (she has 7000 vaginas, p.64); therefore, she is capable of doing the most psychic damage. When Medusa threatens Elizabeth and tries to prove her sexual superiority, she tells Elizabeth that she has no vagina. However, it "was not maddening to her to be told she hadn't a vagina. She might have had but it was not such a pleasant area of the body to concentrate on, possibly only now and then if necessary" (44). Elizabeth can find at least some level of comfort because she is a "real" woman—only because her expression of sexuality is legitimized through her (even troubled) marriage to an unnamed man. Her easy elimination of him from her life—after all, she simply takes the "small boy" and leaves—suggests that her marriage was in the first place, a claim to womanhood and some semblance of Africana female "normality." Thus, the snail boy is symbolic of her sexual expression of an earlier time and her sexual repression now. The visions of 'Dan', the nice-time girls and Medusa are "snails" unsettling the comfort of her madness—even though sexuality offers other comforts, i.e., the warmth of a penis and the security of the status of wife and/or

mother. But why the attention to sexuality in the 'Dan' sequences?

Sexuality is inextricably linked to history, tradition, and defense mechanisms. Another reading of Medusa's statement ties the male voices in Elizabeth's head with the jeering of the female-voiced Medusa who denies her womanhood. In denying her womanhood, Medusa scoffs at her inability to reproduce culture in her son. This idea is amusing even to Elizabeth who "laughs" when she hears her son and Kenosi holding a conversation in Setswana, something she can never do.

Perhaps Paul Gilroy's discussion in *The Black Atlantic* offers answers for us about the connection between Black sexuality and the politics of the homeplace—how sexuality is specifically tied to cultural affiliation.<sup>10</sup> He writes:

The themes of nationality, exile, and cultural affiliation accentuate the inescapable fragmentation and differentiation of the Black subject. This fragmentation has been compounded further by the question of gender, sexuality, and male domination which have been made unavoidable by the struggles of the Black woman. (35)

A sense of alienation and detachment, as described by Gilroy, from their communities also drives these characters to the kumbla. Aunt Becca schools Nellie about boys and

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<sup>10</sup> Chapter 4, "Bodies of Knowledge" delves more intensely into the link between sexuality and the politics of location and the homeplace. I will touch on it here only enough to satisfy the issue of sexuality in the texts.

sex and marrying well, but she also reminds her that she cannot associate with people beneath her station. Aunt Becca teaches Nellie how to wear a kumbla, but this is not the type of kumbla Anancy weaves. This kumbla is actually an encasement to avoid contact with "real" Jamaicans and consequently alienates rather than protects. In so doing, she reenacts the role of the family matriarch, Tia Maria, the common-law wife of a white man, who "did everything to annihilate herself [. . .] her skin, her dress, her smell" (139) and "nurtured a kumbla" in each of her children to alienate them from Blackness and to ensure their future wealth and prosperity. Thus as indicated earlier, Nellie's fragmentation is also a result of her ambivalence toward middle class values: she wants the material wealth, but not the alienation. The desire for cultural acceptance is manifest in her serving as secretary for a group of radicals until her childhood friend, Bubba Ruddock, rescues her and forces her to face who she really is.<sup>11</sup>

Nellie sees her family history as being detached from the histories of others in her Jamaica homeplace. Her family is comparatively wealthy, though they come from "peasant stock." This difference is noted by Nellie early

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<sup>11</sup> This involvement also acts as a kumbla, but not the kumbla that is madness.

in her life, when she is given not one but two Easter dresses and a straw purse to match. Realizing the excess of the gift in the presence of playmates who have so little, Nellie recognizes the difference as separation from the other children and later, as her middle class separation from Jamaican community. Her removal from the immediate Jamaican culture is also evident as she grows older. It is only when Aunt Alice connects Nellie to the culture, the land and its people—walking her through her family history and showing her how to do her part—that Nellie begins to feel strong enough to rip the seams of the kumbla. Until Aunt Alice's cultural redemption, Nellie could not untangle the connections between the cultures of her family and that of the Jamaican people.

Similarly, Elizabeth is forced to recognize herself. Even though Elizabeth is not maddened by Medusa's accusation that she has no vagina, the accusation that she is not linked up to the people drives her stark raving mad (Head 44). Elizabeth's disintegration and insecurity stems from this perceived disconnection. Tossed around as a child from foster home to foster home and then sent to a mission school where she is alienated from other kids and treated inhumanely because of her mother's "insanity," separated in South African society by the label "coloured,"



detached in Botswana because she never learns the Setswana greeting in entirety symbolizing her isolation, Elizabeth tries to "link up to the people" through her work with the garden project. She brings some of the same unresolved issues to Tom, the American Peace Corp volunteer, and he is the first to get at least some insight into the struggles of her soul. To an extent, his frankness and friendship serve to keep her in touch with reality.

Separation from culture is clearly a factor in *Funnyhouse of a Negro*. Sarah's obsession with her father's Blackness and her mother's fairness is a product of her own self-hatred which is bred by a society that devalues Blackness—from skin color, to hair texture, physical features—and that portrays Black male sexuality as "larger" than life and Black female sexuality as deviant.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy* and Zee Edgell's *Beka Lamb* clearly exemplify the "trouble" with letting the snail in the kumbla. Lucy's mother exemplifies the type of sexual rearing—slightly exaggerated—in which Elizabeth and Nellie are schooled. But Lucy's intends to be the slut her mother despises. Does Lucy destabilize notions of woman - womanness? Especially when she "tongues" her friend Peggy and in her wish that the fisherman had molested her instead of Myrna, a girl from her Caribbean neighborhood? Lucy recognizes the sheer pleasure of the snail abiding within the protective shell of the kumbla, but she also comes to know its 'Dan'ger—as does Beka Lamb's young friend Toycie. Both of these young girls—less sophisticated in their sexuality—find themselves on unstable ground. Toycie slips into a serious despondency because of her pregnancy and the now unrequited love of her teenage boyfriend (who offers too much promise to blow his chance on a girl who did not wait for legitimate expression of her sexuality). Toycie sacrificed not only her claim to legitimate womanhood but her own promising future as a violinist. Eventually, Toycie finds shelter in madness to buffer the pain, and dies.

Sarah's madness is also protection against feelings of alienation and rejection. In her discussion with her selves she speaks of being surrounded by white friends, discussing "white" subjects and erasing her Blackness.

Nellie's, Elizabeth's, and Sarah's madnenses illuminate their alienation from the community. It is in her madness that Nellie realizes the irony of her situation—detached from her involvement in her homeplace, but involved in a U.S. struggle. This is also a kumbia for her, a way to avoid her reality. Until her kumbia experience, Elizabeth is under the assumption that racism is a Black-white phenomenon, but in her madness she confronts the demon realities that chauvinism exists across racial and gender lines.

According to Carolyn W. Sherif's theory, to link the individual to the social environment, there is a need for a concept of self-system. This, she defines as "a constellation of attitudinal schemata, formed during development through interaction with physical and social realities" (qtd. in Murray 88). She asserts that other concepts that link the individual to the social context include reference person, reference groups, and reference categories (ethnic group, social class). Although this development is lacking in the three characters because they

are without home, culture, and race, it is through finding "reference persons" or "groups" that they can emerge from the kumbla.

In the end, the kumbla's protection is either successful or not. Madness can provide one the necessary "break" from a troubling, fragmented reality where one exists multiply till one can fit the pieces together. But one must look both within (one's internal being, the soul) and without (the external world which created the soul, that of which the individual is an extension) to emerge whole. The external and internal, the looking within and without must coalesce, not simply coexist for one to come out of the kumbla healthy.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, when one is cloaked in madness for so long that she cannot distinguish pieces or when the kumbla is used to completely separate her from reality, her true self and community, she becomes "delicate"—fragile, even more fragile than before entering the kumbla. Thus madness, the kumbla, loses its effectiveness, its ability to empower, and cracks, exposing

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<sup>13</sup> Perhaps the looking out and within Brodber speaks of can best be explained through W.E.B. DuBois's principle of double consciousness—the ability of Africana peoples to look at themselves subjectively in terms of their own culture and objectively in terms of the West. See *Souls of Black Folk*.

her to elements before she is capable of handling them.<sup>14</sup>

The kumbla fails.

The kumbla of *Funnyhouse's* Sarah fails her in this way: in its protection of her, it allows her to go too far within herself and she ends up killing herself.

As Brodber's analysis points out: "Nurturing a kumbla is like nurturing any vaccine, any culture. Some skins react positively, some don't" (139). Kumblas, we are further warned, break if there is too much exposure to the sun. A kumbla makes one delicate if one stays too long in it: one loses the ability to separate the real from the imagined and the conjured, or the true self from other selves. This is what happens to Sarah; her self-hatred and perpetuation of the hatred of Blackness in her selves result in those selves turning against each other. Her killing herself results from her trying to kill them.

Sarah's selves compete for dominance and control. Psychologists who study multiple personality disorder (MPD) argue this is the case. Distinct personalities develop out of an individual's need to protect herself, and when these multiple personalities develop, there is literally a struggle for control between personalities.

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<sup>14</sup> Kumblas that remain too long in the sun crack—that's why Nellie must be shipped out in her kumbla at night while the neighbor's back is turned to fix his own kumbla.

Sarah's personalities also vie for whiteness, the status of "the whitest." And her madness and suicide (though we really cannot call it that since one well-developed individual personality killed another) result in our discovering the fact that she and her selves wish to avoid and erase the truth of their Blackness.

At the sight of her hanging from the ceiling, Raymond, her Jewish lover proclaims, "She was a funny little liar" (23). And then we learn that her father is not dead but alive and well and living with a white woman or "whore" as Raymond characterizes her. But was Sarah a liar? Did she lie? Psychologists have not been able to come to any conclusion as to the definitive causes of multiple personality disorder. They have discovered that either sexual abuse in childhood causes MPD (Dworetzky 491) or MPD is caused by complications in the development of memory.

Sarah's personalities are born(e) to protect the weaker Sarah from far too painful memories and reality. Throughout the play, we get certain repetitions: memories of father (the Blackest beast); memories of mother (the whitest of them all); an expressed desire for whiteness, for everything white, and a reliving of her killing her father, the Black beast. These memories are fragmented and distorted, but certain parts of the story are lucid. Sarah

talks about her mother withholding sex from her father, his coming home drunk, raping her, and producing Sarah. Sarah narrates that her mother did not and could not give her daughter love and ends up in an asylum. Sarah also reports that she ran from her father's embrace. Why? Why does Sarah appear to hate him so? Her selves also hate him, as if they have joined together against a common enemy.

With Raymond's concluding comments, we find that we cannot completely rely on Sarah's memory. So how do we interpret her memory? Could her self-hatred be a result of her father's rejection? At the time of the play's publication, Africana cultures were celebrating their victories; gaining independence from European colonizers and fighting for civil rights in America. The Muslim movement was at its height, preaching a rejection of the divinity of Christ and European religion. It is ironic that Sarah's hatred of Blackness comes at this time.

But is her self-hatred a result of her father's rejection? We learn that the figures/statues/decor the Duchess and Queen Victoria Regina refer to are actual pieces of art in her father's home with the white woman. Her memory reconstructs but displaces the scene. But in our analysis, we come to conclude, that her father is not the Blackest—he is the whitest and his rejection of

Blackness is perceived as a rejection of his daughter. He is the whitest in the sense that he values a white woman over his Black wife and child and white art over Black art.

Sarah does not emerge from her madness because she never sees past her internal struggle. Self-hatred will not allow her to use all of the information and distorted memories for reintegration of the self. She can only hate and for her the kumbla fails.

While Sarah fails to emerge from the kumbla, the other two characters do. If we look at the three texts comparatively, we discover the reasons Sarah's kumbla fails her and Elizabeth and Nellie's succeed. First of all, both Nellie and Elizabeth were coached out of their kumblas. Although "only you rip the seams" to open the kumbla, wholeness-reintegration-is not only an individual matter. Nellie's Aunt Alice and Elizabeth's new friend and work partner, Kenosi, are culture-"healers" and warriors, women who lead Nellie and Elizabeth through fragmented memories and disintegrated personalities toward validation and wholeness through speaking the culture and connecting them to the real and tangible. They serve as cultural links sifting through the imposition of Western ideas and values, which cause erosion of the African personality.

The very woman who is said to dwell in her own kumbla or madness rebuilds Nellie's memory. Since Aunt Alice never has to deal with the sexual trauma that comes with being a woman and since she is not "right in the head," she is unaffected by the quest for material gain and the need to keep a safe distance from poor islanders (the way Aunt Becca is). It is she who shows Nellie how to remove her kumbla.

As Mordecai convincingly points out, "The places and times, moods and events are the remembering of Nellie: the story of her progress through experience is the account of how, from her revisioning of her ancestors, she discovers . . . her own integrity, or as Aunt Alice puts it, how to 'do her part.' It is from rehearsing of their memory . . . that Nellie becomes able to discover and assert herself" (44).

The entire novel is a re-membering of Nellie: her childhood, her education; her college education in the United States, her political involvement, the death of her young lover which sends her directly to the kumbla, as well as mediated remembrances of ancestors. The bond that Aunt Alice forms with Nellie in her childhood carries over and helps recover the Nellie that was submerged by Aunt Becca's



indoctrination into sexual repression and middle class alienation.

Likewise, Kenosi constantly brings Elizabeth back to reality when Elizabeth is lying in her bed with terrible headaches, confused about 'Sello' and under 'Dan''s threats of destruction and exposure. Just when she is about to yield her life and her sanity to these other voices within her, Kenosi appears in her home and reminds her of the tangible, the material reality: she reminds her of the garden project, the work to rebuild Botswana and make it independent of South Africa. On another level, Kenosi also protects Elizabeth's claim to womanhood/motherhood through caring for the small boy during Elizabeth's stay in the hospital, for it is clear that the small boy's very existence saves his mother's life and aids in her movement away from madness and out of the kumbla.

Perhaps somewhat connected to the coaching out of the kumbla, another reason Elizabeth and Nellie succeed is found in their ability to look both within and without. If we return to the Anancy tale, Anancy advises Tucuma to follow his own lead and listen to the voice within himself but to also look to others who are going in the same direction. Even in the beginning, Elizabeth, after her

first public breakdown "could turn inward and find that the center of herself was still sane and secure."

Elizabeth, though struggling with the internal strife caused by the rigid classification of "coloured" assigned to her by South Africa, studies the human experience. She questions, answers, and struggles with her moral consciousness personified by 'Sello' as well as the irreverent and racist attitudes (personified by 'Dan'). Even as 'Dan' seeks to tip the balance of power in his own favor to destroy both Elizabeth and 'Sello', Elizabeth has the ability to look inward and find the center of herself still sane (55). She is also able to logically and rationally debate the issues of development, politics and the well-being of her son, as well as her own exclusion from the Motswana. Outside of her internal struggle, Elizabeth leads a normal life and it is the reality outside of her—her son, Botswana, the Garden Project, Kenosi, and Tom—that rescues her from the struggle between good and evil raging in her.

Nellie's view from the kumbla is also clear, made so by two human reconnections: with Bubba Ruddock, the childhood friend she thought she had lost and Aunt Alice who is unencumbered with the weight of sexuality and culture.

Funnyhouse's Sarah is only capable of rehearsing her inner agonies because the struggle between her selves is

bitter, destructive, and internalized. The outside world only exists as a prop for her errant imagination. The form of madness Sarah takes shelter in turns against her, and her selves attempt to reconstruct history rather than bring resolution to her particular conflicts.

While Elizabeth and Nellie stand on the periphery of an internecine struggle (between 'Dan' and 'Sello' and Aunt Becca's teaching and Aunt Alice's), the balance of power shifts and eventually stabilizes. They come to recognize the intricate binding of history, tradition, and cultural values. They move beyond the Black and white (figuratively and literally) to the areas of gray where things are not so absolute and certainly not as they seem. Sarah's whole world, indeed her whole self-concept, is defined by images of Black and white. The dichotomy can only be eliminated by her erasure. The distorted memories and the absence of a culture bearer to help her find her way out of the kumbia finally lead to her eradication, both mentally and physically.

#### CHAPTER 4

#### MAD ACTS AND BODY PARTS: SAVING THE E/BODY THAT IS HER OWN

*He told me I was made for his use, made to obey his command in everything.*

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Harriet Jacobs*

Africana women novelists write out of recognition that the BODY of the African peoples throughout the world itself has been abused through materialism, imperialism, colonialism, and exploitation, and they write out of acknowledgement that their bodies have typically been instruments of oppression. Sexual violence has always been an integral part of domination; consequently, the Africana women's body has been the site of mutilation and abuse—culturally, imagistically, historically, and scientifically.<sup>1</sup> Controlling images or stereotypes of Black women in the United States and abroad prevail and continue to dehumanize Black women and denigrate the Black female body. Therefore, much of Africana women's writing on the body/Body is descriptive, corrective and redemptive—

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to physical damage, the psychological damage also stems from attacks on the character of Africa/Africans. Claims that Africans are lazy, backward, unenlightened, promiscuous took root in the several centuries ago; however, they are still prevalent today.

rendering more plausible histories from our own perspectives and reminding us that the shame we have suffered and the abuse we continue to endure is not of our own making, that despite horrific, catastrophic attacks on the whole Body we should celebrate our survival rather than accept a heritage of pain and victimization. In spite of the reality that women's bodies have been used toward the mortification and subjugation of an entire race of people, the woman's body has also been a tool for Black men; it has become the culture-bearer, child-bearer, burden-bearer, and its value has been determined by how well or how much it "bears." This reality finds its place in literature.

Françoise Lionnet points out, "In post-colonial literature, the gendered and racialized body of the female protagonist is consistently overdetermined; it is a partial object on which are written various cultural scripts and their death-dealing blows" (87). Women writers, then, re-inscribe the body, but rather than speak for the body, they allow the body to speak both for itself and for them. Because, in literature and in reality, Africana women generally lack access to sites of power that allows them to speak about the basic oppression of women and because they are often forced into a sort of communal silence that makes them

complicit in their own oppression, much of the body's speech comes through or is borne by madness.

This chapter, then, centers on the female body as the terrain on which madness localizes, manifests itself and plays itself out. The Africana female body is the terrain of madness, not because madness is the epitome of femininity, as other theories suggest, but because the body is the most contested space. Men vie for control of it; cultural expectations limit it, and stereotypes that transcend geographic boundaries devalue it. How madness is defined is determined by the text one reads, but in the three texts to be discussed here, madness is a manifestation of the mind's refusal to tolerate forced silence and abuse against the body. Myriam Warner-Vieyra's *Juletane*, Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, and Gayl Jones' *Eva's Man* reclaim three errant madwomen, murderers in fact, and allow their madnesses to tell their stories. The three texts reveal to us how controlling images, gender expectations, questions of sexuality and aggression can lead Black women to unhinging psychological places and spaces because of the resulting conflict between those expectations, race and gender "responsibility," and personal desire. They show us that patriarchal structures and politics in Africana communities hurt Black women in

the same way colonialism, imperialism, and racism hurt the colonized culture. In these texts, the body is made the target of cultural madness, and it is the body's failure to yield—a child, sexual pleasure, or even protection—that catapults the characters to madness. The characters attempt to control their circumstances through controlling their bodies. Linked to the idea of forcing the body into submission is the belief that controlling one's physical body and subjecting it to traditional rituals can make or keep the BODY of Africana people whole despite gender conflicts that create psychological schisms in the first place.

The first section, "Childless Mother: Discourse of Madness," examines Myriam Warner-Vieyra's *Juletane* in terms of the interior space that her title character invites us into. It examines a madness that results from childlessness in a culture that purportedly honors motherhood above all else and from polygamy as a cultural "norm." These values benefit Juletane's husband, Mamadou, while robbing her of a marital voice and equality. The section will begin unveiling the discrepancies in the (post)colonial situations of women in Africa and by extension of the Diaspora, and where these problems lead female subjects. "Breaking the Silence and Making the

Body," the second section, focuses on Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and examines patriarchal expectations under a colonial regime. But this section deals with the sacrifices a woman character makes to preserve culture and cultural values—and to keep Western culture out. Our character in this section "sells" her body at her own personal expense to her Body of people, which does not rescue her or render the promised gifts. As an adult, a mother, and a wife, she suffers severe psychological consequences for her teenage decision. Section three, "Dismembered Bodies or Murdering a Myth," studies the title character of Gayl Jones' *Eva's Man* and her lifelong struggle with men who seek to dominate her sexuality. Eva's journey leads her to strike out by dismembering her lover's penis, and it is then that we are invited into Eva's fractured world.

The novels are set in different parts of the Africana world—Senegal, the United States and in an imagined African community, by writers from different parts of the world—Guadeloupe in the Antilles and the United States. But the novels are connected because of Black women's shared historical past of colonialism and imperialism and encounters with Europeans that not only impaired the economy, but wounded the culture and the relationships



between men and women. The novels raise issues of barrenness, sexuality, genital mutilation, castration, silence, and violence. They raise questions about the usefulness of psychiatry that does not seem to answer the particular circumstances of Africana women or their particular needs. The novels disrupt our sense of madness and what it looks or feels like. Each novel calls into question whether the characters are indeed mad or merely tortured and wounded. As the authors unveil issues of castration, polygamy, disfiguration, women's sexual freedom, and the way in which culture shapes personal politics, we are disturbed by the removal of clearly demarcated lines of oppression that cause us to dichotomize the world of oppressed and oppressor, sane and insane. For Juletane and Tashi the oppressor is not white or someone from a foreign land. This oppressor demands of his subject the same submission required of him, but silence is imposed on the grounds that speaking up against his oppression is disloyal and unAfrican. This idea unsettles our characters. Eva's silencing is a bit more complex and troubling because it seems self-imposed.

Juletane's, Tashi's, and Eva's madnesses are born of their sexual oppression and silencing. In their loyalty to a larger Africana BODY (in some cases, a BODY of men), they

silence themselves or are silenced because of societal expectations, and their madnesses become "bodily." Their madnesses give them agency—a voice—and, in a way, break cultural silences.

#### Childless Mother: Discourse of Madness

Warner-Vieyra's title character is plunged into what she calls a "well of despair" after she discovers she can no longer bear children for her polygamous husband. Her culture shock is no less than the psychological trauma associated with her inability to conceive, and both are exacerbated by her conflicting position as a first-world third-world woman. The author, born in Guadeloupe and living in Senegal for most of her life, uses her cross-cultural experience to create a character that personifies the complexities in being a Westernized woman of the African Diaspora. Although *Juletane* is not an autobiographical text, Vieyra admits to giving her title character her own personality and basing her actions on her own hypothetical reaction to Juletane's circumstances.

Warner-Vieyra explains:

Since psychological problems, particularly women's struggles with depression have always fascinated me, I placed her in a situation where the only possibility of getting out that she has is through inner escape.

Losing her grip on the reality which for her is so awful, she must turn inward. (Mortimer 111-112)

Juletane's inward stance takes readers through a causal chain which leads us through various geographic spaces (Africa, the Caribbean, France) and meta-spaces (memory, dreams, mud-pit, diary) so that we may better understand her particular plight in Africa and why she, unexpectedly facing polygamy and barrenness, sinks lower and lower into mental unrest. Finally, she arranges the deaths of the first wife's three children and inadvertently that of the first wife as well; she also actively destroys the favored third wife's beauty and haughtiness.

Juletane, a Caribbean woman living in France, marries a Muslim from Africa, and as she anticipates her arrival to the "fatherland," she discovers that her husband has another wife, Awa. Though crushed by this reality and disturbed to the point of self-abuse and hospitalization when the reality of sharing her husband with Awa sinks in, Juletane accepts the situation once she learns of her pregnancy, and Mamadou again declares his undying love for her. Juletane's happiness is short-lived because she gets hit by a truck and loses not only the baby she carries but also the ability to conceive again. Awa, her co-wife, moves into the house with them and conceives again, a child

that she offers to Juletane as her own. Juletane, who by now has sunk into profound depression, lets the woman keep her child and retreats to a spare room in the house that was once the room of Diary, Awa's oldest child.

Just as she is settling into a pleasant, though limited, routine again, Mamadou takes a third wife, Ndeye. Unlike Awa, who accepts Juletane and seemingly appreciates her plight, Ndeye is cruel to Juletane, calls her "the mad one" and speaks ill of her right beneath her window. Ndeye is the favored wife, the one on whom Mamadou spends money they do not have and whom he takes out to clubs every weekend. Juletane falls lower and lower into despair until she feels nothing. She steals a notebook belonging to Awa's oldest child, Diary. She records her life story, her pain and rejection by Mamadou, mistreatment by Ndeye and her friends, her questions, her answers, from August 22 to September 8, 1961. In this short period, Juletane recounts and probably causes the death of Awa's three children, Awa's subsequent suicide, and the mutilation of Ndeye's face. She also tells in this diary events of her life before she met Mamadou: her mother's death shortly after her birth, and her father's some time later during a hurricane, her removal to France to live with a stern and proper godmother-aunt, who suddenly dies on her way from

work when Juletane is 18. From that time on, Juletane is on her own until she meets Mamadou, a law student, who becomes her world, she who has no friends, family, or home. He was more than a husband or lover to her. And he remains more even after his death. For a few days before Mamadou's tragic death, which occurs on the day she plans to give him the diary, Juletane is happy. In the psychiatric institution, there are people to talk with, people who listen to her, outdoors, gardening, and activities to keep her occupied. After she learns of Mamadou's death, she returns to her despair; the man who's been everything to her is gone. Three months after his death, her heart simply stops.

Juletane's story is framed by the story of her case worker, Helene, who is on her way to the altar to marry a man ten years her junior simply because she wants to have a child and because, with this young African man, she can still maintain her independence and her cold heart. Through Juletane's story and her eventual madness, caused in part by the traditional African polygamous household, Helene begins to change her destiny. Her icy heart begins to melt. Although we get only intermittent glimpses into Helene's small apartment, her world unfolds when she finds Juletane's diary among things that she is packing for her

move. It is Juletane's story that is revealing. Helene through her own story redeems Juletane's story from the darkness in which it is cast and in so doing redeems herself. The novel is set in Senegal, and is not expressly feminist; still Vieyra cogently defines connections between women of Africa and the Diaspora and the gender oppression they must face together.

The opening line of the novel is revealing. In a move that is similar to Jean Rhys' opening line in *WSS*, Vieyra writes, "They say a removal is as bad as a fire." And after, refuting the analogy, she ends the first paragraph, "After a fire, what is left in the ashes is almost never of any use" (1). These are Helene's thoughts, but Juletane's reality. Juletane is twice removed, from the Caribbean by circumstance and from France by deception. Even though she anticipates standing on hallowed ground, her reason for going with her husband to Africa is not to be in Africa but to be with her husband, who is her whole world, and she will follow him to the ends of the earth. What is left of the ashes of Juletane's life is her diary, and that is what saves Helene from herself.

On the first page of her diary, Juletane describes the circumstances of her conception and birth (she was conceived during Lent, a period of abstinence and fasting

and born "with condemnation" on a day of rejoicing, December 25). What she writes a few lines later invites us into her world and reveals the journey she retraces through keeping the diary: "At birth, then, I was already a victim of the elements, not to mention three centuries of our people's history which my frail shoulders were to inherit. . . ." (2). Juletane accepts a place among burdened Africana women, but a little further in this first entry (even if at this moment in her writing she is resigned to fate), she also intimates to her reader that she recognizes her particular situation as a displaced Africana woman, the reasons for it, how it affects her, and how she uses it to her own psychological advantage. She questions:

Here, they call me 'the mad woman' not very original. What do they know about madness? What if mad people weren't mad? What if certain types of behavior which simple, ordinary people called madness, were just wisdom, a reflection of the clear-sighted hypersensitivity of a pure, upright soul plunged into a real or imaginary affective void? (2)

In this first reference to her madness, Juletane distances herself from the ordinary and "normal" and questions definitions and designations of madness. Her inquiry echoes theories posed by R. D. Laing, Michel Foucault, and Thomas Szasz that madness is (1) a path to knowledge and enlightenment and (2) not really madness at

all, but a variation of or deviation from societal norms. She casts doubt upon her own madness or lack thereof from the onset, claiming an affinity to other women of Africa and the Diaspora because of her oppression and suggests that her response to such victimization is not only normal but also instructive. Here also, Juletane positions herself above those who name her "mad" as she does in a few other places. On Juletane's first visit to the psychiatric hospital, Mamadou is told she is depressed. And later, the diagnosis is "dissemblance." But here she describes the emotional expense of her experience, being plunged into a void. In other places she describes her situation as a "well of despair" and recounts dreams in which she is invited into a mud pit. The pit is two things at once: it is the darkest, lowest place as well as an elevated level of consciousness. Juletane wants her intended reader—Mamadou, who in fact, never reads the diary—to understand that she is not simply having feelings of loneliness, but inwardly she is in a place where understanding cannot reach (down to or up to) and at the same time it is a place so removed from this world that very few can grasp its significance and meaning.

While Juletane makes such claims of her mental state, she is so desperate in her loneliness and so disturbed by



the encounter with polygamy that she can see no further than Mamadou, the man she feels rescued her from France and the husband who abuses her trust and pride in the first place! Juletane acts the part of a mad woman, but in her circumstance she is "the most lucid person" she knows, with only certain "bitter days" filled with rage (2).

Juletane's psychological afflictions are spawned by the intense depression she suffers because she cannot come to grips with or even comprehend the reality she has been thrown into: a husband who is married to other women and a body that will not yield a child. To her, Mamadou's behavior is unfathomable. So is polygamy. So is barrenness. She had never imagined that her world would come to this. At times, Juletane believes she is only pretending to be mad. She believes that she sanely does things and sits back and watches the reactions of those around her; for example, once after becoming enraged she goes to her room, comforts herself by shredding her sheets then tearing the shreds into tiny squares. She then spreads the tiny squares all over the yard and watches Awa's reaction. At other times, her mad acts seem only a performance by some entity outside herself—detached from who Juletane really is. Still, at other moments, she admits to acting in rage against some injustice, such as

when she mutilates Ndeye's face or spits shower water into Mamadou's.<sup>2</sup>

Juletane does have moments of clarity. Juletane's lucidity comes in her observations of what she experiences as the abuses of polygamy and the reality of being childless in a culture that purportedly honors motherhood above all else, but her lucidity is clouded by her feelings of betrayal and invisibility.

Juletane can extricate herself from her co-wife status (through divorce and repatriation), but by the time she learns of this and by the time Mamadou is willing to let her go, her barrenness is discovered, and she allows herself to be submerged by despondency. Her spirit wanes. Even though she has removed herself from the "competition" of co-wife status by retreating to her own world, she experiences moments of rage when Mamadou takes a third wife who is rude and abusive toward her.

### Insider Outside

One of the most troubling aspects of Juletane's position and of her madness is that she sees herself as both apart from the Africans because of her specific

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<sup>2</sup> Disassociation, Juletane's disorder, helps individuals obtain gratification and simultaneously to avoid stress. It also provides a means of denying responsibility for behavior that might be otherwise unacceptable (Dworetzky 488).

acculturation and a part of them because of the common struggle against European oppressors (which is most evident in her peripheral participation in Mamadou's and his friends' political discussions about ousting colonial and neocolonial powers in the beginning of their relationship in France). At times she is unable to distinguish between these positions and she certainly cannot understand why things are so. Her physical community consists of Mamadou, his Aunt Khady, Awa, and her three children (Diary, who comes to Juletane with her lessons and repeats her work to her, Alioune who was offered to Juletane after her barrenness is discovered, who speaks French because Juletane taught him, and little Oulimata who is only two but who will be "as pretty as her sister") (40), and Ndeye and her friends, Binta and Astou. Awa's children provide some relief and joy to Juletane. Juletane loves the children; they often visit her in her room. Awa and she even share sisterly moments and feelings toward each other. In fact, Awa looks after Juletane like a mother. Ndeye comes in and upsets a balance, using up all of the household money, breaking Juletane's favorite Beethoven album and slapping her face.

Furthermore, in the early days of her marriage, Mamadou would take her with him to family events, introduce

her, and then relegate her to a corner with the other women, women who did not speak her language and whose language she did not speak. The other women's language becomes "taunts and jeers" that remind her that she is an outsider (38). This position outside of traditional African culture comes shockingly to her when Ndeye calls her a *toubabesse*, European, thus, identifying her with colonialist settlers. But Ndeye goes even further in her abuse by using her own language against her: She and her friends speak in French beneath Juletane's window "to make sure she doesn't miss a word" (4). Although she recognizes she is not AFRICAN, Juletane is offended because she includes herself among the darker skinned race oppressed by Europe. In calling her a European Ndeye removes the physical connection she embraces with those with whom she shares a racial heritage.

Although Mamadou's Aunt Khady, Awa, and Awa's children provide a community of sorts for Juletane, her loneliness is made more evident by this cultural exclusion. Nowhere is this outsider-ness clearer than on August 23 when she prays, "Show me, I pray the true path of liberty. Give peace to my soul. Teach me to forgive them, make me an example of wisdom for this house. You have said, and I believe, that your wisdom is folly for men" (9). Juletane

again questions definitions of madness, not only placing it above what is considered normal behavior but placing it in the realm of godlike intelligence. Much like those imprisoned in slavery in America, Juletane endures her prison for the time being, but yearns to know "true" freedom that can only be known through peace and wisdom and forgiving one's oppressors.<sup>3</sup> What is most striking is the incongruity of this moment. Here we have a mad Caribbean woman from France living in Africa praying to her Christian God in a Muslim household that her madness might be a manifestation of God's wisdom. Despite the superior attitude toward the Africans with whom she lives, Juletane is convinced that her madness (even if she believes she is feigning it) will reveal the "folly" of polygamy.

Juletane's exclusion is even more evident in her non-physical community, the "community" of her madness that pronounces the folly of her present situation. She hazily operates in this domain, which consists of mud pit people, her father, her memories, and her past. It is a community that insists upon her connection with them and reminds her that she is outside of and too celestial for Mamadou's community. This community wants her, beckons her, asks her

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the work of such slave poets as Jupiter Hammon and Phillis Wheatly.

to stay, but Juletane is torn between this, particularly the connection with her father, and Mamadou's realm of the living. On another level, this mud pit community points backward to her original African community of involuntary travelers from the Africa to the Americas who chose not a life in slavery, but a watery baptism/grave as a testament to European savagery. She is encouraged to give up African "slavery" and choose her own fate and make sense of her own condition rather than simply accept what has been handed down to her.

Her co-wife status and her childlessness, the very things that catapult her into madness and throw her out of control, are also the very things that enslave her inside Mamadou's culture. Although Warner-Vieyra's novel reveals varying perspectives on polygamy<sup>4</sup>, Juletane's madness is used to comment on the shortcomings of the polygamous system. It is reasonable that Juletane would find this unfathomable. She does not learn of her co-wife status until after she is married, and she has no cultural referent for polygamy. But while her problems are caused by this particular patriarchal reality and the patriarchal

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<sup>4</sup> For Awa, the traditional African woman, it is simply an unquestioned way of life. For Ndeye, the favored wife, it is a way to material gain and excess. For Juletane it is inconceivable that a man could share his love, his body, and intimacy with any other than his one chosen wife.

attitudes surrounding it, Juletane's desire is still and only for her husband. She cannot leave Mamadou because she believes she cannot live without him, as demonstrated by her 20-something-year-old heart stopping altogether only three months after his death. While Juletane does not directly rebel against African patriarchy, she illustrates through her diary the suffering she goes through because of what she sees as the gender expectations and the inequity involved in being a Muslim wife.

### Discoursing the Body

Juletane's barrenness is a more complicated and startling condition because in many African cultures motherhood is honored above all and because her inability to conceive points to the cultural assumption that Juletane is barren of thought, words, and culture.

Many African women's novels focus on motherhood and mothering from varying perspectives. Definitions of good mother-good wife are often synonymous. A good mother-wife is one who produces male heirs while a bad mother-wife is one who produces no male heirs. Other types of mothering include surrogate, substitute, co-mother, and non-mother. According to patriarchal ideology, a woman's primary function is reproduction. In fact, "motherhood is so

ingrained in women's psyche that the alternative to the loss of a child is the loss of self, of gender and of identity. The woman's body has no *raison d'être* when it cannot fulfill its procreative function" (Nfah-Abbenyi 39).

In Africana societies not only is motherhood the "female function" most associated with Black women" (de Weever 134), but "motherhood defines womanhood" (Davies *Ngambika* 243). Motherhood is crucial to a woman's status in African society, and whether a woman's body issues forth determines her status as a woman. According to Carole Boyce Davies:

The preoccupation with motherhood is evident in almost all modern African fiction. At some point, almost every novel dramatizes a woman's struggle to conceive, her fear of being replaced, the consequent happiness at conception and delivery or the agony at the denial of motherhood, various attempts to appease to gods and hasten pregnancy, followed by the joys and/or pains of motherhood. (*Ngambika* 243)

If motherhood is indeed the "ultimate test of womanhood" and of a woman's value, what happens to a woman like Juletane who faces the agony at the denial of motherhood (or for that matter, who does not choose to reproduce) is tantamount to madness or stepping outside of culture or gender role. Juletane explains what happens in her diary:

Knowing that I was to be a mother changed my whole way of looking at things. My main preoccupation was to prepare for the coming of



the baby. Nothing else mattered to me anymore. Mamadou had never been so attentive . . . He confessed that one of the reasons why he had not wanted to divorce his first wife was the fear that I might not have been able to give him children. For him, having children was the greatest blessing in a marriage. (33)

With the discovery of her pregnancy Juletane transforms from estranged, disturbed second wife to an anxious and already doting mother-to-be. Mamadou also changes. He becomes a husband. He admits Juletane's only value to him and their marriage is her ability to produce or "give" him children. He admits that not only are children a blessing of marriage but that Juletane's pregnancy legitimizes marriage and carries out its traditional function. Also lurking in Mamadou's statement that children are the greatest blessing of marriage is the implication that Juletane's pregnancy validates him as a man and Juletane as a woman and wife. Juletane's statement reveals that her happiness is more because Mamadou treats her like a bride than it is about her pregnancy. Juletane recounts the moment she discovered her barrenness: "This confession was like a death knell to my hopes of happiness, to my zest for living. Mamadou as I expected resumed his weekend visits to Awa" (35). With the confession of her barrenness, Juletane loses her spouse, her status as the

loved one, her future, and as she suspects, "her reason" (36).

Juletane's loss is parallel to the loss of Africa as the receiving protective father. She sees Africa as "his country" (13) and the "land of her forefathers" (15) that had become a nightmare when she realized on the way to Africa that she would be an "intruder, out of place, lost," "a stranger" (15). Rather than seeing Africa as a nurturing all-embracing mother, Juletane, even before she gets there, sees it as paternal and patriarchal. Her seeing it in this way foreshadows her reception in Africa. Juletane is outside the bounds of culture before she is made barren. The child was her ticket in. Both she and Mamadou know this. Once and already outside culture, and at the loss of now she realizes EVERYTHING, she has no function, her body no reason for being.

A Yoruba proverb states: *omi bibi ejo, aini oran*, childbearing is palavering; childlessness tragic" (qtd. in Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, *Africa Wo/man Palava* 79). Childbearing evokes "word power" and institutes discourse. Unable to carry out her role of obligatory motherhood, Juletane can no longer speak. She retreats and offers random interludes of lucidity, rage, vulnerability, and softness. She is the quintessential non-mother. She

vacates her marital bed, retreats to her tiny room, and later to the diary-gift. And this is madness, essentially.

Ogunyemi writes, "Women want children so as not to be left out of sites of power" (79). Juletane is no longer empowered—to keep Mamadou to herself, to keep Awa away or even to keep his declared love without giving him a child. Her status as wife is degraded and can be elevated only when she produces a child. The inability to do so, then, "silences" her, leaves her without speech, and outside the realm of female power in Mamadou's Muslim culture.

After two years of grief over this matter, Juletane births not a biological child but a "soul" child, a child on paper who like Gayl Jones' *Ursa Corregidora* is a repository and carrier of her life, culture, and experiences. She rights her circumstances through writing her life. Through this "child" Juletane works through her madness and critiques polygamy and African conceptions of woman-ness. It is also through this "child" that she is empowered to raise questions about her madness and speak out against her oppressors.

As Juletane gets closer to completing her diary, it becomes clear that this is not enough to compensate for the suffering she has endured nor is it enough to compete with Mamadou's physical children or his very real wives. She

realizes that Mamadou sacrificed her mental well-being to claim his own male-power through his first son:

It was to experience this moment [the baptism of his first son] that he had sacrificed me[...]

I knew exactly why I was hurting at that moment. Mamadou's happiness made me sad. If I had had the child he wanted so much, our life would have been quite different . . . I was weeping over Mamadou, so happy, who, in this moment of joy, was not thinking of the pain he was causing me and which he would pay for one day. To get revenge, I imagined him dead, nothing but a fine stinking corpse, on which I spat." (39)

Juletane equivocates in her feelings for Mamadou. She is sad over her loss of him, she pities herself, and though she says she will someday avenge her loss, Juletane cannot sacrifice Mamadou. Since her "child" cannot be overshadowed by his love for them she sacrifices his children instead. What Juletane accomplishes is eliciting Mamadou's attention in a genuine, empathetic way. He now understands her loss and her loss is not his also until he loses all his children in one night, inexplicably.

#### Divinest Sense?

Juletane admits that with the news of her barrenness she lost all reason, but although Juletane is mentally ill, she is not *made* mad until Ndeye enters her life and names her so. Although Mamadou is the center of her madness and

the only "thing" that she feels can rescue her from despair, Ndeye's act combined with Mamadou's ignorance sparks the causal chain that ends in three murders, one suicide, and one fatal car accident, as well as facial mutilation. Ndeye eggs Juletane on, abuses her, and makes her more an outsider than she really is. Juletane is forced to assert her cultural and racial position and her personal authority. She breaks her silence through violence.

While the diary provides one means of inner escape for Juletane, she retreats inward through a combination of dreams, daydreams, and memory. In her moments of wavering between clarity and chaos, Juletane's dreams beckon her homeward and inward. As she tries to come to terms with her present reality, she goes back home, to the Caribbean--and to the circumstances of her birth. Does she suffer because she was conceived during a holy season of abstinence and sacrifice? Her memories of home are dotted with cool streams and waterfalls, the inviting landscapes that distinguished her Caribbean childhood from her Paris upbringing and her African nightmare.

But Juletane's thoughts are also "frightful and confusing." Her "dreams outlast sleep and turn into obsession" (17). She finds herself traveling deeper and

deeper into a dark tunnel, into a mud pit. Like Jean Rhys' Antoinette, she is invited further and further into her madness, and asked to join and stay. She is told there that the internal world is safest and that the mad are filled with wisdom (70). Juletane often finds herself caught between dreams and reality—such as the moment before she mutilates Ndeye. She imagines that she murders her in cold blood, and after Ndeye's corpse is discovered, she and Mamadou embrace the happy life they would have enjoyed had it not been for co-wives and children. It is at this moment, wavering between the darkness of reality and imagination, that Juletane tosses the hot pan of oil into Ndeye's face.

Childlessness and polygamy are only conductors of Juletane's madness; they are forces that combine with others to thrust her further into her loneliness. Psychiatrists say that she suffers from depression and later dissemblance. Dissemblance is not a psychological term, but in Juletane's case it takes on psychological meanings. It means to "disguise or conceal behind a false appearance; to make a false show of, feign; to conceal one's real motives, nature, or feelings behind a pretense" (Encarta Dictionary). Although Juletane's third doctor and she herself believe that she is feigning madness for larger

reasons, Juletane's dreams (and even some of her actions) reveal that her pretense is not at all pretense. Those dreams take her beyond the immediacy of her dilemma with Mamadou, and make her accountable for her part in her dilemma. In her desperation for acceptance, she reaches toward an African body that she assumed would embrace her wholeheartedly without reservation or question. She let go her particular Caribbean heritage and disremembered a troubling past that would at least have kept her stable and grounded. Her dream father chastises her because she has forgotten her home, her Caribbean past.

Juletane's madness is different things to different people. To Ndeye she is "the mad one," but she is still a part of Mamadou's household. Although Ndeye could convince Mamadou to put her away, she accepts Juletane and designates a place for her within the household structure: of the three wives, Juletane is the "mad" one, not the mother, not the favored wife, but the mad wife, distinguishing her from the others yet giving her and her madness a place at the same time.

For Awa, Juletane's madness makes her even more childlike than she already is. She is bratty, pouty, and taunting, and in need of Awa's mothering. When Juletane loses her child, Awa offers hers, but like a child who

insists on her way, Juletane cannot accept the substitute boychild because he is not her own. When Awa sends her oldest daughter Diary (who is around seven years old) to check up on Juletane to make sure she is doing nothing wrong or harmful, the mother-to-child nature of their relationship is underlined.

To Mamadou, Juletane's madness is a nuisance, a bother to his conscience. Under false pretenses, he took a lonely, naïve girl away from familiar surroundings and thrust her into circumstances for which she has no social training. Her madness, and devoted love for him, pricks him and finally becomes a constant reminder of his wrongdoing. It is ironic that Juletane's doctors say that she suffers from "dissemlance" because the question becomes, whose dissemlance? Mamadou is obviously the only one who "dissembled" throughout the novel, so Juletane's doctor's diagnosis is two-edged.

Juletane is inconsistent and unsure of herself and her madness. On the one hand, she attributes it to hypersensitivity and wisdom and goodness in a world that seeks to crush spirits like her own. On the other hand, she declares that her madness is someone else's fault and that she is innocent of all the things that happen as a result of her madness.



Juletane's madness is at first perceived as such because she does not and cannot conform to cultural norms that are for her abnormal. She believes she is the only sane person in the place because she feels her views on marriage and spousal obligation are correct and standard. She has been Europeanized and in that way she is the *toubabesse* Ndeye declares she is. Juletane becomes mad-in fact, not right in the head-when in her obstinate clinging to Mamadou, she absolutely refuses to accept her co-wife status. She refuses to accept that he loves someone else as much as he claims to love her and does not love her enough to relinquish his polygamous lifestyle. At the same time she refuses to return to France or to her cultural upbringing. For Juletane the world has become backward and crazy. She cannot imagine why a woman would be expected to share her husband's love or why a husband would not be content with only one wife. She also cannot imagine losing a child, the one thing to give her access to power, and Mamadou's heart.

But in a dream Juletane's father tells her that she has forgotten her past. And thus, perhaps we get to the root of Juletane's madness. If she had held on to that past, she would have had something to grasp to give her the impetus to remove herself from her woeful situation and

return to France or better yet, the West Indies.

Unfortunately, Juletane is still very much the motherless-fatherless child who left the West Indies. She believes she is a mature, sophisticated woman, but the free-spirited girl she became in France is now only mad. Her madness allows her to declare war on Mamadou's household, on polygamy, her own barrenness, and the treatment of barren women.

The visitation of her father reveals the gap between Africa and her Diaspora. Juletane had forsaken her true father(land) for the African one, believing she would find there a home and a family. But what she finds is culture shock. Polygamy and barrenness are complicated issues, particularly in this new culture, and the Diasporic African realizes there's a world of difference between the two worlds. Why does Juletane's father rebuke her for forgetting her past when that past also holds nothing for her?

Juletane believes that Mamadou has sacrificed her but she also sacrifices herself. While clinging to her Christian God and pleading to him to make her an example of wisdom, she is too proud to realize that she is an example for wisdom, and thus, her madness has the larger purpose of rescuing the Hélène's of the Diaspora from a particular

reality in Africa. For H  l  ne, Juletane's madness is instructive, but for the other lives Juletane encounters, her madness is fatal.

### Breaking the Silence and Making the Body

Like *Juletane, Possessing the Secret of Joy* takes us on a psychological journey to the hidden places of historical womanhood, and finally, to finding the secret of joy in resistance to patriarchal expectations of complicity and silence. The text offers a painful glimpse into the world of Tashi-Evelyn-Mrs. Johnson whose story begins in Walker's 1985 novel *The Color Purple*.<sup>5</sup> The approach of European progress threatens the Olinka culture, and prompts a "grown-up" Tashi to go through the coming of age ritual for Olinka girls, which includes scarring of the face with traditional tribal markings in addition to female circumcision, a ritual that is usually performed at age eight or nine. The text clarifies the complex connection between (a sense of) community obligation—in this instance, going through the ritual of female circumcision—and madness. The communal rituals—scarification and circumcision—become for Tashi her culture's act of madness

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<sup>5</sup> In this novel, Nettie, Celie's sister, writes to her beloved sister of her experiences in Africa. One of these experiences involves watching a friendship develop between Tashi, an Olinka girl, and Olivia, Celie's daughter, and a love relationship between Tashi and Adam, Celie's son. We also glimpse Tashi in *The Temple of My Familiar*.

and violence against her body; consequently her body becomes a source of shame and a symbol for the ways in which women are sacrificed and silenced under the guise of tradition and loyalty. But it is the sacrifice of her voice—not *simply* her body—that propels Tashi into madness.

Tashi's story is given to us in fragments, a series of flashbacks and remembrances, dalliances in the present. Her story is multi-vocal and each voice represents not only an aspect of her madness but also an aspect of her oppression. The aspect of her personality that is Tashi is the African child-become-woman who was circumcised; Evelyn is the Americanized African woman, scarred by a past she cannot speak; and Mrs. Johnson, the wife of an American, suffers under the weight of marital oppression. Each of these voices, commenting on Tashi's loss and suffering, is subtly distinguishable only by its particular politics or stance on female circumcision and cultural obligation. Walker adds to these voices the numerous voices of family (Adam, Tashi's husband; Olivia, Tashi's best friend since childhood and Adam's sister; Benny, Tashi's mentally handicapped son; Pierre, Adam's son by Lisette), therapists (Mzee, who represents the Jungian school of psychoanalytic thought; the African American female

psychologist, Raye), the circumciser, M'Lissa, and even Adam's lover, Lisette.

Tashi is convinced that she must go through female circumcision for all of the "conventional" reasons: to serve as a sign of tribal loyalty, to "save" her culture, to stop the taunting of circumcised friends, to be guaranteed a husband—even though Adam, an American, intends to marry her. As a result, she suffers painful sex, painful urination, painful childbirth, and the pain of having a husband who seeks another lover. The physical and emotional agony—combined with what she begins to perceive as betrayal by her community—lead her to madness and the various mental institutions and therapists' offices she frequents. Her agony is then exacerbated by the traditional silence on the physical and psychological consequences of circumcision.

A younger Adam and Olivia are convinced that Tashi is crazy to have made such a decision, and decades later during her trial, ironically, Tashi's own people concur to some degree by constantly pointing out that Tashi made the decision to have the circumcision so late and that the suffering she experiences is her own fault.

While questions about Tashi's madness abound throughout the text, Tashi is clear on the matter. She is

mad. But while she loses her grip on herself, she never does on the realities she faces. Her nightmares that end in self-mutilation, her violent attacks on Pierre-Adam and Lissette's child, and her planned trip to Africa to murder the *tsunga* are manifestations of her insanity. But her madness is instructive on many levels: it educates us on the horrors of female circumcision, unearths the communal secrets that lead to madness.

Walker's title stirs our curiosity; in our search for instructive wisdom on "possessing the secret of joy,"<sup>6</sup> we encounter a tortured mad Tashi, screaming out in a crowded courtroom in Africa "Can you bear to know what I have lost?" Her query--indeed her actual presence--is a searing indictment in the consciences of onlookers and tribal fathers and leaders who CANNOT bear "it" and who have made speaking about "it" taboo. It is at this hysterical moment that we are invited into the process of Tashi's madness, and we find that Tashi does manage to articulate her loss and her madness in a number of ways before the *tsunga's* murder and the trial: 1) through the death of Dura, 2)

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<sup>6</sup> The title of the novel comes from a statement by Mirella Ricciardi in *African Saga* (1982): "I had always got on well with the Africans and enjoyed their company...With the added experience of my safaris behind me, I had begun to understand the code of 'birth, copulation and death' by which they lived. Black people are natural, they possess the secret of joy, which is why they can survive the suffering and humiliation inflicted on them" (qtd in Walker *Possessing the Secret of Joy*).

through the birth and life of Benny, 3) through her dreams, and 4) through her silence. Likewise, her resistance is articulated through the therapists Mzee and Raye, the doll Nyanda, and speech.

Walker uses cultural, historical, and (Jungian) psychological tools to challenge the practice of female circumcision and to lend some concreteness to the complexity and enigma surrounding Tashi's madness. Alice Walker's position is clear: she believes unswervingly that female circumcision is a practice that must cease. Period. Not so clear is the question of Tashi's madness. Like Juletane, discussed in the previous section, Tashi's madness has several layers and results from various stimuli. Tashi's story is multi-vocal, and the author's voice and her agenda are so intrusive that Tashi's madness is difficult to analyze without recognizing that it is contrived to push Walker's own anti-female circumcision agenda. Obviously, Walker is not simply touting *madness* as the consequence of female circumcision, but she is guilty of utilizing Tashi's body for her own political ends in the same way that the Olinka culture does—to make a political statement about oppression and to reclaim one woman's body—

and any approach to Tashi that ignores this is going to be suspect.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the obvious politicization on Walker's part, the genius of her text lies in the question of accountability for Tashi's madness. Tashi's trial is the focal point of the novel, but blame is cast almost everywhere, and so, it seems almost everyone who has come into contact with Tashi is on trial. Furthermore, there is a *process* of madness here that subtly suggests that Tashi's madness does not begin with her circumcision but much earlier.

#### Rite of Passage (to Madness)

Adam makes several statements concerning Tashi's madness. He claims, one, that she leaves all of her therapists prostrate in her wake and two, that she is not mad but tortured. While Adam questions the degree of his wife's mental and emotional disintegration, her actions—abusive behavior, murder, and cackling wild laughter—speak clearly of her inability to cope with the ravages of her psyche. Perhaps Adam recognizes the part he has taken in

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<sup>7</sup> I say this because it is difficult for me to remain detached on the issue of female circumcision, but it is equally difficult for me to remain silent about the way in which Walker approaches the issue or the way in which she silences African women by making Tashi speak for all of them. She is guilty of the same paternalism she criticizes through the novel.



Tashi's "torture" and thus is reluctant to accept responsibility for contributing to or participating in her madness. Of course, to the observing Olinkas she is madness speaking. To Olivia, Tashi is mad for going through with the circumcision in the first place.

Readers will also recall that even on their first meeting, Olivia reports sensing some mental un-ease in the crying Tashi. This insight imperceptibly removes the onus from Tashi's community and on to something else—maybe even Tashi herself as the "communal voice" accuses. When Tashi gives us her point-of-view on meeting the American missionaries for the first time, we learn that Tashi cries because her sister Dura is dead, and Tashi tries desperately to stifle her tears because her mother, Nafa (Catherine), cautions her to do so. There are intimations throughout the novel that Dura's death and Tashi's madness are connected. We do not learn the connection until Tashi returns to Africa to murder the tsunga, not simply for revenge for her own circumcision but for Dura's as well. M'Lissa reports that the thing tossed to the cock that invades Tashi's subconscious is Dura's clitoris, the last piece of evidence that Dura was a living, thriving, sexual being.

The pent-up emotions linked to her sister's death combined with all of her losses drive Tashi to madness. Her madness begins at Dura's circumcision, but it also comes out of the shame that she feels because of the scars on her face and because she comes from a culture that would do "such a thing." The shuffle-step of her gait and the scars on her face make her ashamed.

Tashi's community—her family included—demand complicity through silence. How does she speak the Olinka unspeakable in America—a culture in which there is no referent for female circumcision? How does she speak the pain associated with Adam's long-term affair with a white woman who can enjoy sex and bear a normal child "easily" while her own son's birth is a spectacle and results in his mental retardation? Tashi cannot speak because there are no words for the trauma and agony she faces.

In her remembering, jarred by an image of a cock in one of the Old Man's films of his exploits in Africa, Tashi unearths the figment of her dreams as well as the cause of her mental instability. She makes the connection between her pain (physical, mental, emotional) and M'Lissa. And, even though the decision was Tashi's, as M'Lissa points out to her late in the novel, M'Lissa is assigned the blame. For Tashi, M'Lissa comes to embody the body politic, the

people whom she sacrificed herself for—body, spirit, and mind.

Tashi's silence, like her decision to be circumcised, is another manifestation of her ongoing commitment to her community. To speak of female circumcision, the pain and suffering that accompany it, and the failures of the community is taboo. But the forced silence becomes an inability to speak and articulate the ravages of the psyche that only pushes her further into her madness and makes it impossible for her to speak even when she wants to and needs to speak. Tashi's silencing represents the silencing of women for centuries about the consequences of female circumcision; it also represents the silencing of all Africana women on other forms of abuse. The silence is its own form of abuse; the silence has often been the equivalent of consent. So the women, who do not speak because of loyalty to a body of people or to cultural icons or to men even, seem willing participants in their own undoing. Nafa/Catherine's telling Tashi that she was an easy birth comes loaded with the unspoken qualifier "as easy births go for circumcised women." Tashi's unexpected and mysterious pregnancy (since her husband could never penetrate her because of the stitches) is the real informant. While Adam conceptualizes FC as an absolute or

as the absolute reason for Tashi's madness, Raye implies his own participation in Tashi's silencing and mental undoing. Silence is oppressive and because speech is a luxury she cannot afford, her madness expresses the depth of her pain and trauma.

Tashi is preoccupied with what the actual circumcision has done to her, but her madness comes from the realities of the ritual—having it done to her and the suffering that follows—finding in it not the joy of community uplift but the failure of community to live up to her expectations of its allegiance to her or the failure to even rescue her. But why is Tashi's sacrifice no longer a good one, no longer a viable one? Is it her personal pain that has caused her to no longer appreciate the culture for which she gave her sexuality, her pleasure? While this (non) pleasure seems to be at the heart of the novel, what is clear is that Tashi comes to the conclusion that the rite is more an act of oppressing or suppressing women's sexual instincts and naturalness than it is something that solidifies the Olinka culture. It is even clearer to her that the culture for which she made a supreme personal sacrifice is as oppressive as the colonial regime.

Bring Me Paper the Color of Our Flag

Tashi loses three things through the practice of female circumcision—her sister, sexual pleasure, and her speech. These losses form the greater loss of community and are the foundation of her madness. Clitoridectomy, the overriding violation in the novel, serves as a conduit for all of these losses; therefore, it is the thing that always confronts us in the novel. We must journey with Tashi, Evelyn, Mrs. Johnson, and Tashi-Evelyn through the inner workings of her mind and sit with her through her imprisonment and trial in Africa to understand how the practice and the events are connected. Tashi's body becomes the savior and political voice for her people through colonial imposition and cultural imperialism. Ravaged by a planter class that replaces indigenous crops with foreign ones and abuses labor as well as natural resources and by the imposition of Western Christianity, which attempts to eradicate cultural practices, rituals and symbols, classifying them as heathen, the Olinka tribe fights back. Nestled in the thick of the forest, the Mbele camp resides—hidden from view. When the call is made for uncircumcised women, it is to this place Tashi sets out. She is convinced that her circumcision is a necessary part of the struggle for independence.

The historical reference for Tashi's situation is to the anti-colonial movement in Kenya. When Christian missionaries tried to prohibit the practice of female circumcision, Kikuyu female circumcising became part of the anti-colonial movement. In PSJ Olinka arguments often mimic those found in *Facing Mt. Kenya*. In this defense of Kikuyu tribal life, Jomo Kenyatta defends female circumcision as a cultural practice and places it alongside the anticolonial movement. He writes, "No proper Gikuyu would dream of marrying a girl who has not been circumcised and vice versa" (127).<sup>8</sup> Later, he argues:

The real argument lies [. . .] in the understanding of a very important fact in the tribal psychology of the Gikuyu—namely, that this operation is still regarded as the very essence of an institution which has enormous educational, social, moral, and religious implications [. . .]. The abolition of the surgical element in this custom means to the Gikuyu the abolition of the whole institution.

The real anthropological study, therefore, is to show that clitoridectomy, like Jewish circumcision, is a mere bodily mutilation which, however, is regarded as the *conditio sine qua non* of the whole teaching of tribal law, religion, and morality. (128)

The overwhelming majority of [Gikuyu] believe that it is the secret aim of those who attack this centuries-old custom to disintegrate their social order and thereby hasten their Europeanisation. The abolition of *irua* will destroy the tribal symbol which identifies age groups, and prevents the Gikuyu from perpetuating that spirit of collectivism and national

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<sup>8</sup> This statement has an echo in PSJ; see p. 120.

solidarity which they have been able to maintain from time immemorial (130).

There is no question that the Mbele camp parallels Kenyatta's anti-colonial movement in its aims to use women's bodies to maintain social order and to preserve culture and tradition, and record history. Like Kenyatta, initially Tashi also sees women's bodies as carriers of culture. In her last conversation with Olivia before the initiation, she links Olivia with the colonialist:

"They are right [. . .]who say you and your family are the white people's wedge." She further remarks, "All I care about now is the struggle of our people. You are a foreigner. Any day you like, you and your family can ship yourselves back home [. . .]. You want to change us, I said, so that we are like you. And who are you like? Do you even know? (22-23).

Olivia appeals to Tashi out of love, friendship, Christian duty, and sisterhood, but Tashi lets Olivia know that she has no stake in the matter. She is not African (and not even American for that matter)<sup>9</sup> and does not have to sit back and watch her culture fade away. She can just leave and never look back. Furthermore, Tashi sets up a trinary opposition between herself, Olivia, and the white Them: Olivia and her family are sent by "them" to change "us."

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<sup>9</sup> This line of argument is reminiscent of the argument of Africans in *The Color Purple*, that the Black missionaries from the U.S. are not really African, and therefore, are suspect. What Tashi adds here is that American Blacks (missionaries) are "worse" than not African but merely imitators of whites bridging a gap simply because of their skin color, not socialization or cultural likeness. Also see PSJ, pp.)

The colonial relationship is not simplified by the binary once we realize that Olivia is Black doing the white man's work of undoing culture. Tashi underscores the contradiction of Olivia's colonial/racial positioning as both colonizer and colonized, and as both "white" and "Black." She further suggests that Olivia needs to "decolonize" her thinking. Tashi reveals other, more personal, pre-initiation insecurities to Raye. Her circumcised friends "jeered at me for having a tail" and "run from [uncircumcised girls] as if we were demons. Laughing though. Always laughing" (120). More importantly, Tashi agrees to the circumcision

to be accepted as a real woman by the Olinka people . . . Otherwise, I was a thing. Worse, because of my friendship with Adam and his family and my special relationship to him. I was never trusted, considered a potential traitor even. (120)

Tashi gives up the taboo pleasures of her own sexuality for the Olinka and for the leader (121), but in a way she also does it for herself to undo the work of undoing culture begun by the missionaries. Unfortunately, in undergoing the rite, she falls victim to physical and psychological colonization of the Olinka patriarchy. The physical pain that results from her experience is minimal



compared to the psychological trauma from which she must recover.

Tashi's madness consists of incomprehensible recurring dreams that leave her screaming, bleeding, and violent. They lure her into a world she cannot comprehend. Because of her inability to speak, her madness makes her do wild and crazy things: she throws rocks at Pierre, the lovechild of Lisette and Adam, cuts ringlets of blood around her ankle. It is the "mad" act between her violence and speech—the drawing of the cock—that causes her to return to Africa, to confront the *tsunga*, and to (allegedly) murder the *tsunga*.

Although Tashi's madness does not force her into silence, it keeps her there. She shuts out everyone, with the exception of Mzee and Raye, she leaves all her therapists prostrate in her wake. She abuses Pierre and as expected hates Lisette; she has the *tsunga* murdered and takes the punishment for it. She speaks the unspeakable in court.

In an attempt to unravel Tashi's mental dilemma and to topple or give light to her dark tower, Tashi is referred to Mzee, the old man, who turns out to be the uncle of her husband's lover and a follower of the father of psychoanalysis. Through Mzee's painting therapy she

discovers the symbols of a recurring dream she has, and in doing so, begins to break her silence. After the old man's death her madness is handled by Raye, an African American psychiatrist the old man met at a conference. It is with Raye that Tashi begins to find the connection between her circumcision and figurative ways in which all women are circumcised, even in the United States. What shocks her beyond belief is that the ritual was performed on a white child living in America at the request of her mother to prevent the child from finding "comfort" in her clitoris. For Tashi the U.S. has become a haven, a safeguard against the "backwardness," and sexual oppression of women in her native Africa. She has grown to love it, to call it home, to make herself an American. She believed that people "do not cut off parts of themselves in America" as Olivia declared on that fateful day many, many years ago. And this attack on American character is beyond her realm of thought.

Mzee, her white doctor, finds her fascinating and difficult to analyze because she like all African women (in his estimation) can never blame their mothers for their psychological dilemmas. Her African American doctor finds her fascinating because although she has no frame of reference for the physical "harm" Tashi suffered, she

recognizes a oneness in women's oppression, and she realizes that there is a psychology of pain involved—something that the old man, after all his years of analysis, never recognizes.

While Mzee's analysis is usually (stereo) typically Western and almost anti-African, he is responsible for Tashi's most important breakthrough. And it is on the walls of his guest room that she paints the cock and the crippled foot that are too large for her mind and too large for the canvas on which she paints. He also gives her Raye—perhaps out of recognition that Western psychology will not serve its purpose in the case of an African-Olinka woman, suffering the consequences of African-Olinka culture.

The body for which Tashi sacrifices herself, the body with which she sacrifices herself, transforms. Now she fights for the right of women to experience sexual freedom and pleasure, and she sacrifices her physical body not through a ritual that will leave her alive but dead—the circumcision itself—but one that leaves her dead, but alive. Her taking responsibility for the murder of the tsunga and the murder trial that ensued will live on as a testimony of the ravages of female circumcision. It is at the moment of her death by firing squad (for murdering the

tsunga) that Tashi experiences her final moment of clarity: The secret of joy is resistance.

### Psychoanalysis & Healing

During Tashi's trial in Africa for murdering the *tsunga*, Adam contends that his wife is "tortured," not insane. Tortured by the looming specter of her past: a cock, a crippled woman's foot, a "thing" tossed out to the cock to be quickly snatched and eaten. And it is out of this torture she presumably kills M'Lissa. But Tashi willingly claims an insanity that empowers her, that takes note, that is calculating, that plans and executes every step on the road to her "recovery" that could not be had as long as the old M'Lissa still lives. As long as M'Lissa lives she is celebrated. She is the *tsunga*, the woman who performs the circumcision. Ironically, the *tsunga* is also celebrated in death. In fact, M'Lissa tells Tashi that the *tsunga* is supposed to die at the hands of a woman she is circumcised. This bit of information reveals more than M'Lissa intends—first that other women have also gone mad as a result of circumcision and secondly, that the *tsunga* herself is a victim of cultural colonization.

Through the use of the Jungian therapist, Walker outlines basic premises of Carl Jung's theories of

personality. Jung's archetypes—persona, shadow, anima and animus, and the self<sup>10</sup>—find echoes and explanation throughout Tashi's therapy sessions. The most obvious of Jung's methods illustrated in the novel is dream analysis through painting therapy. Tashi becomes a subject of and a subject under Jungian care. Despite the admission that Tashi's situation is different, Mzee has a constant drive to parallel her circumstance to a broader circumstance for humanity. While to some degree her circumstance can be linked to women's overall oppression, Walker seems insistent on underlining differences. In fact, at moments it seems she ridicules the very idea that we are all the same, e.g., that all of our problems stem from and can be eliminated by admitting hatred for our mothers. The idea that neither Tashi nor the other Olinka women blame their

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<sup>10</sup> Archetypes are themes that have existed in all cultures throughout history. Jung referred to such themes as images, primordial images, root-images, dominants and behavior patterns. Archetypes are essentially thought forms that give rise to visions projected onto current experience. In Jung's theory the "persona" is a "compromise between the demands of the environment and the necessities of the individual's inner constitution. It is the mask we wear in order to function adequately in our relationships with other people. The persona is an archetype because it is a universal manifestation of our attempt to deal appropriately with other people. The shadow indicates the dark, sinister side of our natures; it represents the evil, unadapted, unconscious, and inferior part of our psyches. Anima is the feminine archetype in man; animus the masculine archetype in woman. Basically, all men and women have elements of the opposite sex within them. The self is an archetypal potentiality in all of us. Jung sees it as an innate blueprint that, theoretically at least, is capable of being realized. This destiny within us involves a process Jung called the "way of individuation"—a process by which a person becomes the definite, unique being that he in fact is. The self is the final goal of our striving. (Ryckman, *Theories of Personality* 71-78)

mothers or hate their mothers is particularly difficult for Mzee to digest considering mothers carry out the role of circumcision, and they are thus directly involved in the psychological trauma that results.

Tashi's madness is tied to tradition, patriarchal practices, and the physical pain of her own experience. When we first meet Tashi in PSJ, she is crying but desperately trying to hold back her tears. We do not know she "knows" why and how yet, but her favored sister Dura is dead. Although Tashi suppresses the grief of her sister's death, there are other ways in which Tashi suppresses her real self. The significance of Dura's death and its link to Tashi's madness is not realized until Tashi paints the cock and until M'Lissa fills in the pieces when Tashi returns to Africa. Her imposed silence about Dura's death and the way she died causes her to ignore the promptings of her subconscious-conscious desires and commit herself to even more silence. But the pain of her reality manifests itself in her dreams, dreams from which she awakens disturbed, screaming, mutilating herself.

In Jung's theory, Tashi, by acting for and in reaction to a mass of people instead of for herself, has taken on a persona that is self-destructive, and she must find a way to get back to the core of her being or back to the feisty,

spirited Tashi whom Adam and Olivia first met. The words on her sign—"If you lie to yourself about your own pain, you will be killed by those who will claim you enjoyed it" (106)—illustrate this basic archetype of Jung's theory. For Tashi believes that the elders of her tribe through the tsunga have killed "her." But the sign also illustrates the belief of the tribal elders that women do not have a problem with the practice and are in fact content with it.

Tashi's madness is hard on everyone around her—because there is so much at stake. Everyone around her is sucked into it and becomes lovingly involved in it. The fact that she cannot or will not speak astounds everyone. European psychoanalysts, though fascinated by her case, can see only her individual pain and trauma. They attempt to take her back to the point of origin but fail (if the goal of therapy is to prevent a person from doing harm to herself or others) because they do not see how the circumstances of her life and the experiences of others are unavoidably intertwined. Tashi herself does not begin to really heal until she begins to realize the connectedness of her experience to women's oppression everywhere. And she takes herself the rest of the way on her journey toward healing. Mzee, on the other hand, makes significant strides with Tashi. She is open with him. She can speak. He helps her

expose the truth of her silence—that she has been deaf to the voices of her subconscious. The painted cock helps her to name what has happened to Dura as murder. The thing tossed to the cock by M'lissa's dragging foot is Dura's clitoris.

Another breakthrough Mzee makes, though he does not share it with Tashi, is the connectedness he experiences between himself and "these people." Like Adam, he writes to his niece of Tashi's victory:

They in their indescribable suffering are bringing me home to something in myself. I am finding myself in them. A self I have often felt was only half way at home on the European continent[. . .]. A self that is horrified at what was done to Evelyn, but recognizes it as something that is also done to me. (84)

But the limits of Mzee's therapy lies in the reality that "Evelyn" still has to see him and when he is near death has to recommend another therapist for her. Mzee's methods are useful in taking Tashi part of the way in the journey, but only part-way. His greatest gift to Tashi is Raye, in whom Tashi finds a kinship through her Africanness; she confers upon her the honorary title of witch doctor because Raye becomes one in pain with her.

Although a Jungian analysis might conclude that Tashi's plotting the murder of M'Lissa reveals the dark sinister side of herself, Tashi is never more herself than



when she returns to Africa and takes her healing into her own hands. M'Lissa embodies tribal pride and the terror Tashi experiences late in the night. In killing M'Lissa, Tashi symbolically speaks out against the oppression of women through circumcision and vindicates the mothers who lead their daughters to sacrifice.

Tashi also speaks through another type of silencing and sexual blinding when she returns to Africa, through the story of Nyanda, a tribal doll. Olivia brings Tashi a replica of the doll while she is awaiting trial in prison. It is a doll that is hidden; little girls are not allowed to play with it. In fact, Tashi remembers the doll as something snatched from her hands when she was a child. The ancient doll symbolizes male-female sexuality—sex between women and women as well as sex between women and men alone; it also shows woman pleasuring herself—and comes to symbolize the sexual strictures against which Tashi resists, the strictures which cost her sanity.

In the novel Black women's sexual pleasure is taboo—this is in direct contrast to the sexual awareness and openness of European women as exemplified by Lisette and her purposely choosing to have an illegitimate child with someone else's husband. Lisette, a feminist activist and descendant of a feminist activist, remains just at the

periphery of the novel, even though her presence is also a looming specter for Tashi. She and her "perfect" son Pierre are painful reminders of everything Tashi feels she is not--whole, sexual, free and without pain.<sup>11</sup> And Adam, not completely innocent, takes yearly trips to see Lisette and Pierre; Raye confronts him with the reality of his participation in Tashi's oppression and silence.

Tashi dies for M'Lissa's caretaker who actually does the murdering.<sup>12</sup> With her act she saves the other daughters of the Olinka. When Tashi broke the silence of her own pain, she ended the hush-hush of male domination and the structures placed on and myths surrounding women's sexuality and sexual pleasure. For she, who had little joy after her circumcision, found the secret of Joy--resistance--when she found her own voice through madness.

#### Eva's Man: Murdering a Myth

In her response to Houston Baker's treatise on African American writings, Mae Hendersen counters, "The power of Black women's writing is its ability to disrupt and break

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<sup>11</sup> Yet there's quite a bit of the wetiko psychosis operating here with Lisette feeding and feeding off of Tashi's misery; always interested in her pain, her mental state, her husband. . . It is significant that Lisette takes Adam when he runs to her after Tashi runs from him and "his kisses" and it is then that Petit Pierre is conceived. It's a little more than ironic that it is Lisette's uncle who leads Tashi to the most significant part of her journey. And it's interesting that Mzee would say that in Tashi's case is a book for the masses...commodifying Black madness.

<sup>12</sup> See pp. 250-251 and 264.

with conventional imagery" (161). She adds, "Black women's lives and literature are much too complex to be limited to the duality of positive and negative images" (162). I imagine that Hendersen must have had texts like Gayl Jones' *Eva's Man* in mind as she critiqued Baker's "felicitous images" theory of Black women's writing. If anyone still holds onto the idea that we must create positive images of Black women to balance out or negate negative images, they will be sorely disappointed with *Eva*. Gayl Jones' *Eva's Man*, a phenomenal and disturbing text on the exploitation of Eva Medina Canada, relies on knowledge of the sexual typecasting of Black women. The book takes three cultural and historical myths of women and rather than debunk them by transforming them into positive images, capitalizes on and manipulates them. Using the *Eva* character, Jones does this in a way that reveals the contradictions inherent in living those myths and that also demonstrates how such objectification can rob a woman of her own sexuality and sexual identity and leave her silenced in a way that can only be broken through mad acts of violence. It is through these myths that sexuality, violence, and madness are inextricably linked.

Like Elizabeth in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*, *Eva* is forced to confront the myths of Black women's

sexuality, but instead of struggling against such typecasting, she reinvents herself as an inverse or composite of three woman's myths: the sexual temptress Eve, the snake-haired, gaze-casting Medusa, and the lover-killer Queen Bee. Salome, the daughter of Herodias, a fourth representation is added when Elvira, her cellmate, recasts the story of John the Baptist's head on a platter with the story of Davis's penis on a platter.<sup>13</sup>

Gayl Jones' Eva, in the crowning act of her madness murders her lover and then bites off his penis. The world surrounding the hotel room where this took place is both horrified and intrigued by her act. Just what would stir Eva to such a move is beyond the media, the law, and psychiatry—and answers to questions elude us even as Eva's story unfolds. Eva's introduction to sex comes at age five when her neighbor Freddie Smoot sticks a dirty Popsicle stick up her vagina and then has her squeeze his penis, which she describes as feeling like a "milkweed." Discussions she overhears between her mother and her friend Miss Billie contribute to her knowledge. When she is 12, her mother's 22-year-old lover, Tyrone, places Eva's hand on his penis and tells her he knows she wants him. Just a few years later, at 17, her cousin, Alfonso introduces her

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<sup>13</sup> See any version of the Bible: Matthew 14:8 and Mark 6:24

to the nightclub scene and also makes sexual advances toward her. Other men at the clubs also make advances until she stabs Moses Tripp, a regular of the clubs, for trying to touch her against her will. Tripp claims he only offered her a drink and called her a bitch. For this act, Eva, an otherwise "good" girl, is sent to reformatory for three months and jail for three months (after she turns 18). It is while in reformatory that she alienates her parents and befriends Hawk, the 52-year-old man who becomes her husband, even if only temporarily.

Until the time she leaves her parents' home for a girls' reformatory and then prison, Eva is a seemingly normal child growing up in Harlem, New York. The arrest and subsequent imprisonment silence her. This should not surprise us. Eva learns to be quiet from a very early age. She tells no one about Freddie, and pretends not to listen to Billie's comments about sex and the Queen Bee, a beautiful woman whose lovers always die, or about old man Logan who Billie swears made her look at his penis when she was a little girl. Eva remains quiet not only about her mother's affair, but about the young man's advances toward her and later about her father's "gentle" rape of her mother. Eva is quiet about Alfonso's advances. She does not speak up for herself when she is arrested for stabbing

Moses Tripp. She quietly marries and then leaves her husband who will not let her have a phone or friends, and is haunted by a past and a past wife who left him. Ironically, it is Moses Tripp who makes her privy to Hawk's ghosts and later warns her that "one day she's going to meet a man and sleep with him."

We meet Eva at 43 in a psychiatric prison five years after the mutilation, as she recounts, revises, and rememorizes fragments from her past leading up to her imprisonment. Like *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*, Eva's narrative unfolds through flashbacks and disconnected scenes that eventually lead to her self-rehabilitation and reclamation.

Eva supposedly tells her own story; the novel is written in first person and begins at the end. But Eva's rendition of her story is not only fragmented but also imprecise and untrustworthy. Her unsettling silence leaves readers with few answers and more questions. Her reasons for murdering Davis are irrational and unclear. She never gives any and Dr. Smoot, her prison psychiatrist, and Elvira, her cellmate, offer only speculation.

The title of the novel, *Eva's Man*, suggests to readers that it is the man's story we will hear as well. However, the story we get is Eva's, or is it? Eva's subjectivity

relies on the voices of others, or her subjectivity is seemingly suppressed by multiple voices in her head whose stories get told by Eva. Davis constantly asks Eva to tell her own story. Her psychiatrist also chides her to tell her own story. They constantly call attention to her silence, her inward stance. Davis, after asking her who broke her virginity and receiving no answer, asks, "You keep all your secrets, don't you? Why won't you talk Eva?" Eva responds, "There is nothing to say" (101). Earlier, when she meets Davis in the restaurant, she answers his request to hear about her with, "I don't like to talk about myself" (73). To Dr. Smoot's barrage of questions at their various therapy sessions, "Why did you kill him? Why won't you talk about yourself?" Eva remains adamant in her silence, but the author herself in an interview commented on Eva's silence: "Eva refuses to render her story coherently. By controlling what she will and will not tell she maintains her autonomy. Her silences are also ways of maintaining autonomy" (Tate 97). And interestingly, it is through her silence that she subverts male authority.

While it might seem that we will learn of Eva's man, Davis, the one she murders, Eva tells us of all the men who sought to dominate her and all men who impose ideas about femininity and womanness on women. This is certainly

illustrated through her psychiatrist. Elvira calls him and all the other psychiatrists who work in the women's prison, Dr. Fraud. This, of course, brings to mind Sigmund Freud who imposed ideas about women and women's sexuality on society, constantly questioned femininity and ideas surrounding it. But like Dr. Freud who tried to answer the question, "What does a woman want?" Smoot cannot answer the questions he wants answers to. Furthermore, Eva's psychiatrist's name is David Smoot. Eva laughs when she hears his name because it invokes remembrances of the beginning of her sexual education—Freddie Smoot's milkweed penis—and the sexual experience that lands her in prison—the castration of Davis Carter. Her doctor becomes an everyman who, through asking her to tell her own story, wants to recast it in terms of male realities and interpretations. The men she encounters attempt to figure her out and fill in what she refuses to speak. They assume things.

We do not get what the men really want to hear, the man's story; instead, we learn how men have misused Eva and even more shocking to male observers, we learn that Eva has no remorse for castrating Davis. This is the story that is not supposed to be told, though. Eva's interrogators want her silence; she can only speak as her speech relates to



why she murdered a *man* and ultimately what prompted her to castrate her lover and her victim. Gloria Wade-Gayles in the foreword of Hernton's *The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers*" asserts:

The mandate of all oppressors, Black men included, is to keep the oppressed silent, keep them isolated, physically and psychologically. Because as long as the oppressed are isolated and silent, the world won't know that their experience is a shared experience, not an isolated experience" (xxii).

But even as Eva is not direct about her male oppressors, her cellmate, Elvira who will not shut up, lets us know through her offhand comments that Eva's is a shared experience, and Miss Billie drives this point home even further as Eva recounts episodes of her childhood listening.

Men prey upon Eva. They impose ideas about sexuality on her, ideas about what she wants and who she is sexually while forcing their own penises on her. Miss Billie's remarks about women and men and sex make an impression on Eva; they are part of her conflicting remembrances. Davis is equally attracted to and repelled by Eva. Even though she tells him she is menstruating, he still wants her in his room. He is repulsed by the thought of her bleeding, yet he waits the three days for her period to end, he rubs her stomach, he treats her like a wife. This is the thing

Eva holds on to, and probably the thing that sends her over the edge. He has a wife, but by not informing her of this one fact, he robbed her of her agency, and took away her right to make a decision about whether or not she would have a sexual relationship with a *married* man. So he was just like the others. She did what Moses Tripp said, but she was not in complete control of the situation.

Eva seems eerily passive, accommodating even, in her responses to these sexual impositions. She accepts them almost without comment, but then she also without warning does things that seem drastic for her: she stabs a man, she suddenly leaves her husband, she travels around the country, she murders a man and mutilates him after passively remaining in his unlocked room for several days even when he is gone. But Eva's seemingly accommodating spirit coincides with her equal attraction and repulsion toward the penis.

Melvin Dixon in "Singing a Deep Song: Language as Evidence in the Novels of Gayl Jones" observes that "rather than acknowledging the part she played in abusing men . . . Eva persists in acting out with Davis the role of women predators" (247). Dixon's commentary is perceptive to a degree, but ignores the fact that most of Eva's abusive acts toward men are retaliatory, self-protective, some even

warranted: She stabs Moses Tripp because he inappropriately tries to touch her; she bruises Alfonso's ego and rebuffs his sexual advances, because he is her married, wife-beating cousin; she abandons Hawk because he created a prison environment for her in which she could have no phone and no friends. While Eva is not simply a passive victim, she is also not an aggressive murderer, ensnaring men in her web of deceit and lust and killing them without cause. Although Eva fantasizes about this vision of herself, she is at best a passive-aggressive prey. Dixon does not see the transformation when Eva turns predator rather than prey. Davis is watching, but Eva is also watching. She is so quiet in her madness, that we do not expect her to strike, especially by castrating and mutilating a man.

As Eva's psychiatrist somewhat aptly observes, Davis had come to represent all the men in Eva's life. Others believe Eva kills him because he is married. That is perhaps only part of the story. We, too, can speculate as to why Eva mutilates Davis in such a way. If we examine her history with the penis, we find that even in her childhood it is the thing she despises even as her natural curiosity attracts her to it. Both Tyrone and Alfonso catch her staring at their private areas, and tell her that

she wants it. Eva cannot reconcile this desire and hate; this is clearly evident in her act of destroying the penis while still trying to make the "dead" penis perform. Another reason for Eva's action against the penis is that men often used it to try to possess her, to use her. Her madness is concentrated on the power associated with penis—to own and possess a woman. In "offing" Davis and his penis, she is free to confront her past, no matter how twisted and warped that confrontation is; she is also free to recognize and name her desire. She is free to undo the myths she associates herself with (Medusa, Eve, Queen Bee) and rather than reinforce stereotypes of Black female's loose sexuality, Eva defies them.

Her reasons for murdering and castrating Davis are a bit more complex. For one, Davis tells her too late that he is married. The scene is disturbing:

"It's like you were a husband," I said.  
 He looked at me hard. He was frowning.  
 "I mean when you slept with me while I was bleeding, like a husband would, and didn't try to arouse me till I was ready."  
 "What's a man for?"  
 I didn't answer. He parted my thighs.  
 "Why you want me?" I asked.  
 "Only to ride you."  
 "You said you used to work with horses."  
 "Yeah, that's how I got away from my . . . wife. Brought some horses up this way, and stayed."  
 "You didn't tell me you were married."  
 "I thought I told you."  
 "No, you didn't tell me."

Big rusty nails sticking out of my palms. But I let him fuck me again. And when he finished he lay down with his head on the pillow. I wanted him to stay closer longer, to stay inside me longer, but he didn't, and I didn't ask him to. I leaned over and put my tongue in his mouth. (95).

By this point, Davis' offenses are mounting—he has previously misnamed Eva Eve; calls her Medusa; takes her comb and refuses to let her comb her hair and then tells her she looks like a male lion. In this scenario, he informs her that his only use for her is sex-animal-like sex, in fact—after she expresses some appreciation for his tenderness toward her—"like you were a husband"—and then tells her nonchalantly that he is married. The agency she fought so hard for is lost. He sacrificed her, "big rusty nails sticking out of my hand." But even with the revelation of his arrogant dishonesty and disrespect toward her, Eva confounds us. How do we make sense of the allusion to the crucifixion and her desire for him to "stay inside me longer"?

Eva also murders Davis for his wife. She joins forces with her against Davis's complete disregard and disrespect. Though these reasons seem simplistic, they are complex when linked to Eva's history and the history of Black women's sexuality.

Although she is fascinated by the myth of the Queen Bee and maybe even wants to be a queen bee, she acts out the male fantasies that have been imposed on her. Her gaze, that innocently falls on the penises of Tyrone and Alfonso when she is 12 and 17, becomes by the time she is in her late 30's the type of gaze that would bring her to fulfilling Moses Tripp's prophecy that one day she is going to meet a man and sleep with him. It is the same gaze that is invoked in Davis' slip, Eva Medusa—Medusa, the once beautiful goddess who suffered a horrible fate for arousing the jealousy of Athena, cast her gaze on men and turned them to stone. Davis makes her hair like Medusa's hair by not allowing her to comb it and Eva asks her psychiatrist if her hair looks as if snakes were coming out of it. Davis also makes the mistake of calling her Eve, the original temptress of man. Eva becomes Eve when she is biting into Davis penis as if biting into the forbidden "apple"—distinct from the milkweed she squeezed as a five-year-old. And in Elvira's interpretation Eva becomes Herodias' daughter when she learns Davis' penis is stored or kept as evidence in a freezer on a platter. Eva accepts the myths and acts them out in the same way her mother plays the role of the whore for Tyrone and then is forced to play the whore when her husband rape-punishes her for

her affair. Eva becomes the Medusa of Davis' Freudian slip. She becomes the Queen Bee. Eve. And later Herodias' daughter.

By the novel's last page, we get the sense that Eva begins to understand and come to terms with the idea of freedom in sexual expression. And the point Dr. Smoot misses dwells beneath the surface. Davis had come to represent all Black men and Eva had come to represent all Black women who are victimized by the least likely villain/victim.

Eva comes to represent the plight of Black women in America. She joins many other literary Black women in allowing herself to be used by her own. Black women, hurt by race, gender, class, sex structures, have not always found relief or protection from Black men. Whereas Black men felt emasculated—even castrated—by an inability to protect Black women from social predators in slavery and beyond, some have also participated in their oppression. Tyrone, Alfonso, Moses Tripp, Hawk, and Davis are all part of a joint effort to conquer Eva's sexuality and her spirit as a woman. Eva goes along with this for nearly 40 years of her life.

Although we never learn from her own mouth the reasons Eva kills Davis, we know that her sexual agency manifests

itself at the very end of the novel when she engages in lesbian sex with Elvira—who, like the men, also preys on her. But emphasis on the word NOW, the very last word of the novel, gives the impression that this is a conscious decision rising out of desire and feeling—which Audre Lorde would label “eroticism.” Eva is empowered through finally coming in touch with her own eroticism; through this act alone, she breaks the hold of male sexual expectation and finds an alternative expression for her sexuality that is not bound by male structures or boundaries. She is not Queen Bee, Herodias’ daughter, Medusa or Eve, “female predators” who prey on men. She is lesbian, contested and criticized still, but empowered.

Eva’s madness, though temporary, as Elvira points out, is part of her transformation from prey to predator, and it is actually the catalyst for it. The critic bell hooks says that she is moved by the knowledge that “we can take our pain, work with it, recycle it, and transform it so that it becomes a source of power” (*Breaking Bread* 6). Eva’s pain turned madness becomes a source of power that she turns against the group of men who throughout her life have tried to dominate her sexuality. Through her act of castration she also turns her madwoman-power against the egomaniacal male patriarchal order that made the situation



she is cast in possible. If Eva's mad act is not horrifying enough, Eva's silence when men want speech is just one more jab at the male dominant order. Her criminal act mocks them. She castrates a Black man who was ritually and symbolically castrated each time a Black woman was raped during slavery.

Her last mockery lies in the self-empowered act of cunnilingus at the end of the novel. The NOW suggests, after all of Elvira's advances, that only Eva will decide. But of course, this act also has its loose ends and leaves us questioning whether she is now Elvira's victim?

#### Conclusion

Juletane's, Tashi's, and Eva's madnnesses are linked to systemic and cultural violence against women, physically and psychologically, and each character's situation suggests that mad acts of violence are both justified and necessary to reclaim their own bodies and to empower other women to break through the oppressive silences of gender and race subjugation. The characters also remind us that the professional community cannot always serve the particular needs of Africana women. For Juletane, cultural arrogance and African limitations in understanding her mixed-acculturation left her with no solution to her psychological quandary but to return to France. For Tashi,

America had/s no referent for female circumcision and she becomes an aberration, a spectacle. For Eva, male-centered psychoanalysis is incapable of seeing her as a subject-she is only an object of study, a curiosity, a spectacle, and an errant woman who grossly wronged a man. For all these women, their madresses empower them to speak and to act against their victimizers.

## CHAPTER 5

### TUG-O-WAR: MADNESS, TRADITION AND ASSIMILATION IN TSITSI DANGAREMBGA'S *NERVOUS CONDITIONS*, JAMAICA KINCAID'S *LUCY* AND TONI MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE*

A number of novels written by Africana women across the Diaspora show us characters who grapple with issues of culture and marginalization or colonization during childhood, adolescence, or young adulthood: *Beka Lamb*, *Bluest Eye*, *Lucy*, *Annie John*, *Crick Crack Monkey*, *Nervous Conditions*, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* to name a few. In many of these novels, young girls—on the brink of womanhood and unable to face unfulfilled promises of independence, self-awareness, and freedom—take the step over into madness. Ideally young girls should not have to worry over becoming women, but maturing into women is actually a terrifying and maddening process. This process is even more complicated for Nyasha, Lucy, and Pecola because of the added complication of race. They are torn not simply between mother and self as (in most theories) girls becoming women usually are. They are torn between mother, father, or family and some imagined perception of themselves; they see their families as a cultural tool or pawn and themselves as

a twisted amalgamation of the conveniences and appeal of their local culture and the adopted culture.

These key characters found in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy*, and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, respectively, acquaint us with the angry, paranoid, and obsessive madness that results from the opposite pull of tradition and assimilation and that manifests itself in the characters' relationship with and to family and community. The characters are pre-teen to late-teen young women who are just beginning to feel the tug of all these forces and find themselves in the midst of a personal war of epic proportions. The African (Rhodesian/Zimbabwean) character Nyasha (*Nervous Conditions*) and the Caribbean character Lucy (*Lucy*) find themselves wavering between traditional values and assimilationist ideas and realities. Whether they are mad might be questionable, but their fury is undeniable and out of control. These characters attempt to re-create themselves detached from their parents' expectations and molding and away from societal expectations. They try to imagine themselves into being. They agonize over and internalize the struggle between tradition and assimilation. Pecola Breedlove (*The Bluest Eye*), the African American character, brings an element of contrast

to this chapter. Though she is passive and without a passionate stake in personal politics, societal or cultural values, she completely internalizes racial values of 1940's United States.

As many critics have already done, it would be easy to attribute the aforementioned struggle these girls face to the "natural" process of becoming a woman, marked by the intermediary stage between adolescence and womanhood: when the girl is becoming a woman; when she is becoming more concerned with her appearance, more interested in boys, actively aware of her sexuality; when she is becoming more independent in her thinking and beginning to overtly question authority. As we shall see, what Nyasha, Lucy, and Pecola experience is part of a maturation process, but in and of itself, this view is too simplistic to answer to these characters' specific mindsets, which are unswervingly focused on rectifying racial and cultural inequities. Because they are increasingly becoming more aware of their social and political oppression, the (post)colonial, racial, and cultural spaces and places and circumstances of Nyasha, Lucy, and Pecola politicize what might be termed a universal rite of passage. In short, in their situations, the rite of passage is itself politicized because of who these young women are and where they live. Thus, their

experiences are part of a maturation process, but the madness of the three characters discussed here on some levels has less to do with growing up than it does with making political, strategic, and concerted choices to alter their individual circumstances or "decolonize their minds." The struggle between traditional cultural values and assimilationist ideals, in fact, pushes Nyasha, Lucy, and Pecola into a type of mental angst or madness that is characterized by contradictory and obsessive behavior, racial deprecation, and dejection. Since colonialist values also shift the dynamics of the family, the tug-o-war spills over into and plays itself out in familial relations. The madness of our three characters, though a result of the destructive struggle between value systems, is decidedly political.

These three texts speak volumes on the (post)colonial subject position from the perspective of young women. Though speaking of three different types of oppression—Rhodesian (neo)colonization and Shona patriarchy, British "presence" in a small Caribbean island and a mother's internalization of those values, and Black America's internalization of white racist values in terms of acceptable standards of beauty—they each unveil the emotional and mental effects of such oppression and the

strain it places on family relationships and the formation of identity. Each of the three characters is so embroiled in an act of self-invention that she takes no note of the high stakes involved. She does not realize that her sanity is at stake. So, then, the tug-o-war has another layer—it is a struggle for personhood and personal power.

It might be useful to point out that someone else tells Nyasha's and Pecola's stories. Nyasha's story is told by her cousin, Tambudzai, a voice that is at first uncritical of the oppression of women—except as it regards her own education as an African woman—but who begins to find her voice and uses the telling of the stories "of four women she loves" as her first act of agency. In many ways Tambu is a foil to Nyasha—obedient, somewhat shy, uncritical, grateful, and eventually balanced—reminding us of the innocent awkwardness and insecurity involved in coming of age. Claudia, the voice of Pecola's story, is from the onset critical, questioning, angry. Her retelling of Pecola's story is marked by a sophisticated adult voice rendering a child's perspective on the racism of white America, the intra-racism of Black America and its profound effects on 11-year old Pecola. Neither Tambu nor Claudia's task is simple. With a child's acumen they must wade through contradictions, unanswered questions, and the

nervous tension of societies in transition: guerilla warfare and the fight for independence and self-government in Zimbabwe and (post/pre)war Depression United States with racial division and tensions mounting. They are able to do this quite successfully, but they tell the tale later, much later--after they have grown up or have matured in their thinking. Our characters, on the other hand, buckle under the weight of these contradictions and fall into madness.

Lucy's story, though told in her own voice, also demonstrates a split in perspective and personality: the before-exile Lucy and the after-exile Lucy. The before-exile Lucy reminds us of a Lucy who loved her mother and home while the after-exile Lucy criticizes and finds no place for herself in her mother or the island. She makes no place in herself for her mother or her home. Like Nyasha and Pecola, Lucy's political landscape is contradictory, ambiguous, and tense. British rule threatens to annihilate cultural memory through education and financial exploitation. Lucy cannot stand the British, but her hatred causes her to lose perspective, and she transfers her hatred for the British to her mother and the small island. In her attempt to live without these very fragile but necessary connections, Lucy breaks down because the connections are too strong and too much a part of who



she really is. It is because of this breakdown, if nothing else, that we realize that we cannot trust Lucy's "voices."

This chapter will be divided into four sections.

Section one, "Her Stories: a fully grewed 'oman?"

highlights key points in each text as well as the character's personalities and individual struggles to set the pace of the chapter. Section two, entitled "Powerhouse Lodged Within," discusses the madness of our three characters as a powerful force within that must "out" and as the natural outcome of the impossibility of their goals to create a separate self who is unaffected by the tug of the separate forces operating. Section three, "Tug," focuses on tradition and assimilation as ambiguous, paradoxical, and problematic terms as well as experiences for the characters. Section four, "Man Only in Form," focuses on the tensions within the family as a result of colonial oppression and on how these pressures impact the characters, which in turn, impact the family dynamic and make the home the landscape of this tug-o-war and madness.

### Her Stories: a fully grewed 'oman?<sup>1</sup>

In Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988)

Tambudzai (Tambu) narrates the story of her life and

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<sup>1</sup>A phrase used to refer to being a girl acting like a "fully grown woman."

education and of the four women whom she loves, her mother Mainini Ma'Shingayi; Maiguru, her paternal aunt and Nyasha's mother; her cousin, Nyasha; and Lucia, her maternal aunt who sleeps with Tambu's second cousin Takesure as well as her father, Jeremiah. Each is a victim of Shona male patriarchy and by default also a victim of colonization and impending decolonization. The protagonist, Nyasha, is the privileged teenage daughter of Mukoma Seguiake (Babamukuru), "patriarch" of his extended family because of his education in England, his being principal of the mission school and the only male member of the family who has consistent wages. (She and her brother, Chido, were educated in England during the time their parents were studying for their various degrees). She is disenchanted with her father's benevolence because she believes he does only what anyone else in his position would do. She is also annoyed with her mother's apparent complacency with the role assigned her (being Mukoma's wife, and having to share him as well as her money with his family, having to quietly accept and endure all things), even though she has a Master's degree and earns her own money. Nyasha seems to have answers to every problem she faces, and when a problem seems irresolvable for the moment, she firmly believes that in time a solution will

come or the problem will work itself out. Nyasha's greatest dilemma is that she is neither completely inside African culture nor is she completely outside it. She has been acculturated to Englishness and now she is expected to act African. It is the inability to reconcile the African heritage with the English upbringing in her personality that drives Nyasha out of her mind. Nyasha's dilemma is further magnified by her powerful personal stance against the British because of colonization.

Nyasha is everything Tambu is not, has everything Tambu lacks, particularly the English education Tambu covets. Nyasha is a sharp thinker, providing provocative commentary on most of the intellectual conflicts she encounters. She imitates European models in manner and dress; she is disappointed that her mother's brilliance does not gain for her more respect and authority, and she despises her father's position, his convenient African-ness, his Englishness—his being (nearly) one of "them." The friendship that develops between Nyasha and Tambu, though at first shaky, is characterized by a commitment to education and to sustaining each other; for each has something that the other needs. While Nyasha nearly despises her father for his "gifts" to others, Tambu almost worships him for extending his beneficence to her; she is

in awe of his polish, his reinscribed Africanness. Although this must be placed within the context of Tambu's near disdain of her father's brand of Africanness<sup>2</sup> and the embarrassment it causes her mother, we must recognize that even outside of social standing, Tambu and Nyasha operate in different psycho-social spaces. Tambu lives with Babamukuru, but she is not his daughter. Her obedience stems from her appreciation for the education he offers and her fears of being cut off from his generosity. She realizes he does not have to do this for her in the way he has to provide for Nyasha, his daughter. Furthermore, until "quietly, unobtrusively and extremely fitfully, something in" her mind begins to "assert itself, to question things and refuse to be brainwashed, bringing [her] to the time when [she] can set down this story" (204), Tambu admires Babamukuru's mission and is preparing to join him in elevating the family's economic status above the squalor to which they have become accustomed. I am not certain that it is appropriate to say that Nyasha is not grateful for her father's provision. What unnerves her is the patriarchal stance he takes with the family, his

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<sup>2</sup> Nyasha's "father's brand of Africanness" is a mixture of African and European behaviors but a mixture composed of those attitudes and behaviors which are convenient for him. Tambu's father's brand of Africanness is really a "collection" of character flaws (irresponsibility, dependency), which he compensates for by calling on the Shona traditions of taking care of and looking after family.

inauthentic Africanness, his introducing his family to Englishness and then abruptly taking it away, his submission to the white missionaries who educated him and let him run the mission school. While Nyasha and her father daily struggle over her European attire and her refusal to eat, the final blow comes when he discovers that she lingers after school and flirts with boys. While he believes this is a part of pubescent obstinacy, there is really something more complicated going on. Nyasha is involved in a perilous struggle between Africa and Europe, the one conflict she cannot answer.

Lucy's struggle bears a striking similarity to Nyasha's. However, Lucy's anger is more obviously directed toward her mother, who represents the colonizer in terms of her expectations of her daughter's decorum, position, and education. Lucy's loss of control seems to be a result of her inability to function as a whole person without the familial connection, which has become a political connection. Lucy escapes to the United States to reinvent her character, to erase her Caribbean character, to rid herself of everything that links her to the culture that once colonized her "small island" home.<sup>3</sup> It is in the

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<sup>3</sup> It is paradoxical, however, that Lucy escapes to the US since the British once colonized the US as well.

United States that Lucy takes hold of her own circumstances through mastering her own sexuality and sexual activity, thus defying every restriction her mother places on her. Lucy, like Nyasha, is disappointed in her mother for not using her own brilliance to rise above her circumstances and for not having higher expectations for her daughter. Lucy's story ends with a minor breakdown at her own realization that she wishes she could "love someone so much that she would die from it"—an interesting if not useful revelation considering that Lucy's goal is to detach herself from love and everyone and everything she loves.

Her coming to America, her contempt for her mother, and her sexual indulgence can be easily misunderstood as a simple stage in the life of a teenager. While it is true she will outgrow her condition, we must examine her actions and her anger and how they are related to, perhaps even the result of, "feeling the tug" on all sides. Like Nyasha, Lucy has a friend, Peggy, who is involved in a clash of sorts with her parents, which deceptively can be misread as similar to Lucy's. However, Lucy's love-hatred of her small island homeland, her mother, and her disdain for the British help us to see that her removal from the small island is not simply the final consequence of a teenager coming to independence and maturity. Lucy compares her

Caribbean state with her American state and finds the sameness in everything; in her attempt to escape her mother's ideological influences, she runs straight into Mariah, her boss and friend, who becomes her mother; in her attempt to obliterate her memory of home and mother and create a present and an identity detached from what's gone before, she runs directly into her past. For it is the story of her past, her past with her mother, and her past in the small island that gets told in the book! Lucy's present (and future) is necessarily linked to colonial history and colonial traces in her identity. She connects everything with her past, so when Lewis betrays Mariah, his wife, with Dinah, her best friend, for Lucy the act is not surprising—for her it is simple: men behave in this disgraceful manner and have always done so. Thus, in Lucy's analysis, we have larger, financially powerful nations taking advantage of smaller, less powerful nations; men's or a man's rules for humanity and appropriate behavior change when they stand in the way of his acquiring something he wants. Lucy's clarity on this matter most certainly comes from knowing her father's behavior toward her mother. Her father has numerous affairs and nearly countless children, some by a woman who even tries to kill Lucy while she is in her mother's womb. Lucy destroys

letters and any other concrete evidence of her island past, but she cannot destroy or transform what has already been; she cannot transform the psychological realities of her past. Her very name speaks this impossibility, and at the sight of it scribbled on a page, she breaks down.

Transformation is Pecola Breedlove's task. For how else can a young girl make her brown eyes blue? Pecola is passive and nearly friendless. She is one member of a family that is romanced by its own rejection by society and each other; raped and impregnated by her father and simply stuck with profound ugliness, Pecola wants one thing in life, blue eyes. She gains these when she miscarries her father's child, because obtaining the "bluest eyes," is the one thing Pecola believes in or believes she can have. Pecola has few thoughts besides this as far as we know and all of her emotions and thoughts are centered on this. It is her act of reinvention through "stepping over into madness" which qualifies her for interaction with Nyasha and Lucy. Needless to say, the wish for blue eyes has various implications of cultural neglect. Pauline and Cholly Breedlove, Pecola's mother and father, are so caught up in their own racial oppression, self-hatred, and misery that they cannot provide warmth and love for their



children. Their love is tainted, displaced, twisted, and lost. They breed no love.

Pecola is introduced to us as a "case," the tenuous label assigned to those individuals in whose lives and for whose welfare the state must intervene. Her father has once again physically abused her mother and this time set the house on fire. He is in jail. The mother is with her white family, the brother with a relative. Pecola is a "case." The family is now homeless, or "outdoors [. . .] the real terror of life," as our narrator informs us (17). But Pecola is outside in many other ways. She is outside the standard of beauty. She is outside the reach of warm, loving arms. She is outside the range of assistance that our narrator Claudia and her slightly older sister Frieda can give her. She is loved and unloved, wanted and unwanted. How does a little girl cope with the injustice of living in 1940's America (before "Black is beautiful"), being Black and not so pretty? Who can blame Pecola for wanting blue eyes at a time when beauty and attractiveness were measured by one's proximity to whiteness? The paradox of Pecola's spare existence lies in her loved and unloved state. Her impact on others represents the entire range of acceptance. People either recoil at her dark skin and ugliness, or wish to rescue her from it: Her mother shuns

her, boys torture her, and girls feel sorry for her. Others seek to liberate her from her state. Claudia and Frieda MacTeer, who vie for her attention, who help her through her first menses, who share their Shirley Temple cup, who seek her out for advice, and who endure the plight of the dark-skinned child with Pecola; two prostitutes who accept her, tell her stories, take her in, make up her face, and remind her of her beauty; Maureen Peal the little light-skinned girl who treats her to ice cream cones; as troubling as it is, her father who forgets his "place" upon recognizing in Pecola the fragility that attracted him to his wife; Soaphead Church who writes a long letter to God, half-confessing, half-excusing his inappropriate sexual behavior toward little children—humbled by the meaningfulness of Pecola's request for blue eyes. Each of these tries to rescue Pecola from her ugliness and from her destructive sense of self, but Pecola is so involved in her self-loathing that she does not recognize these gestures. Soaphead Church, the preacher, who places the blue eyes within her reach (through tricking her into killing a dog)—making them for Pecola not simply an unattainable something but a reality—along with the loss of her father's child, gives her permission to make the choice between stepping over or remaining on this side of sanity.

Powerhouse Lodged Within

Nyasha, Lucy, Pecola, stand at various stages along the path from girl to womanhood. I have invoked terms in the previous paragraphs that are problematic and contentious: Anger. Madness. Out of control. Loss of Control. In our culture madness and anger are sometimes synonymous. On closer examination of the phrases in relation to Nyasha, Lucy, and Pecola, we see that anger is the result of something external and madness is the result of something within. Things, events, ideas, people make our characters angry; madness comes when they internalize and hold on to the things that anger them. Eventually, Nyasha, Lucy, and Pecola lose control of their circumstances and end up being out of the control of father, mother, and society. It is the crossing and re-crossing of these various conditions and boundaries, sometimes willfully, at other times not so, that makes their madnesses familial, personal, political, transitional, and, in Pecola's case, final.

Tossed in the midst of an indigenous culture, which makes a certain set of demands, and a "new" settler culture, which makes a different set of demands, these colonial and racial subjects face an ongoing dilemma and

struggle against person-hood and personal power. When their negotiating between the two forces becomes too much, Pecola opts for madness, Nyasha is driven to madness and Lucy operates out of madness.

When Nyasha finally loses her mind in the struggle between tradition and assimilation, the white psychiatrist to whom she is taken concludes, "Nyasha can't be ill, that Africans did not suffer in the way we had described. She was making a scene" (201). Although Babamukuru is satisfied with this response and prepares to take Nyasha home, her maternal uncle, able to "recognise suffering when he sees it" encourages Babamukuru to stay and seek help for Nyasha. In spite of his racist view toward Africans and his negation of Nyasha's personhood and individual suffering, the white psychiatrist is simply responding with the tools that are available to him. Without realizing it, he recognizes that a European psychology cannot always answer to the need and suffering of an African mind.

Tsitsi Dangaremba takes her title from Jean Paul Sartre's introduction to Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*. He writes, "The conditions of the native are a nervous condition." While the phrase "nervous condition" which we use loosely to refer to a person with an unsettled, tense, frantic disposition is not exactly a psychological term

accepted by the American Psychological Association, it is interesting that Sartre would describe the "condition of the native" in this manner. There are certain conditions that are part of the colonial experience and its aftermath that (forever) change the psychology of individuals as well as the society-at-large. Nyasha, Lucy, and Pecola are nervous, tense, on-edge, unsettled because of matters inside and outside of their homes. They can no longer manage their escalating mental furor. The madness that the three characters experience is germane to their experience as African people under white domination. They are mad, and they go mad because they try to control circumstances that are completely out of their control. For Nyasha and Lucy, the British encounter. For Pecola the way she is treated because of her Blackness. For all three, their homelife. They are embroiled in a battle that they cannot help but lose.

Nyasha's breakdown is violent. After mini-struggles with her father before and after Tambu leaves the Mission for a convent school, after many forlorn and unanswered letters to Tambu (for she needed Tambu's stability, her listening ear), after our narrator returns to Nyasha, Nyasha realizes that she cannot win. Our narrator tells us she grew weaker by the day.

'I don't want to do it, Tambu, really I don't, but it's coming. I feel it coming.' Her eyes dilated. 'They've done it to me,' she accused, whispering still. 'Really, they have.' And then she became stern. 'It's not their fault. They did it to them too. You know they did,' she whispered. 'To both of them, but especially to him. They put him through it all. But it's not his fault, he's good.' Her voice took on a Rhodesian accent. 'He's a good boy, a good munt. A bloody good kaffir," she informed in sneering sarcastic tones. Then she was whispering again. 'Why do they do it, Tambu,' she hissed bitterly, her face contorting with rage, 'to me and to you and to him? Do you see what they've done? They've taken us away. Lucia. Takesure. All of us. They've deprived you of you, him of you, ourselves of each other. We are grovelling. Lucia for a job, Jeremiah for money. Daddy grovels to them. We grovel to him.' She began to rock, her body quivering tensely. 'I won't grovel. Oh no, I won't. I am not a good girl. I am evil. I am not a good girl.' I touched her to comfort her and that was the trigger. 'I won't grovel, I won't die,' she raged and crouched like a cat ready to spring.

The noise brought Babamukuru and Maiguru running. They could do nothing, could only watch. Nyasha was beside herself with fury. She rampaged, shredding her history book between her teeth. ('Their history. F[-]cking Liars. Their bloody lies.', breaking mirrors, her clay pots, anything she could lay her hands on and jabbing the fragments viciously into her flesh, stripping the bedclothes, tearing her clothes from the wardrobe and trampling them tearing her clothes from the wardrobe and trampling them underfoot. 'They've trapped us. But I won't be trapped. I am not a good girl. I won't be trapped.' Then as suddenly as it came, the rage passed. 'I don't hate you, Daddy,' she said softly. 'They want me to, but I won't.' She lay down on her bed. 'I am tired,' she said in a voice that was recognizably hers. 'But I can't sleep. Mummy will you hold me?' She curled up in Maiguru's lap looking no more than five years old. 'Look what

they've done to us, she said softly. 'I am not one of them but I am not one of you.' (200-201)

This segment of Nyasha's breakdown offers powerful insight to understanding the potency of her madness and impresses upon readers the urgency to take her madness, as well as that of Lucy and Pecola, more seriously than we would a phase that will pass in time. The dilemma outlined in Nyasha's comments comes from internal agony so intense that Nyasha is "beside herself with fury."

Nyasha's comments reveal a flesh and will struggle. What is it that she does not want to do, but cannot stop from coming? What have *they* done to her? Even while she senses some impending doom, she knows that whatever "it" is it is not her fault or the fault of the other than either. Despite the fact that obedience to her father and ultimately to colonizers/(post)colonizers is expected of all good "kaffirs," Nyasha cannot bring herself to obey or to grovel. Thus, she concludes that she must be evil—not a good girl (like Tambu who will obey and grovel), and she would rather be not-good than to lose self-respect and dignity. The groveling, for her, is a form of death, and even though it is madness—or against the norm—to disobey or to not grovel or appreciate her privileged position, at least mad she is alive.

It is clearly symbolic that Nyasha shreds the history book between her teeth. In her quest to do her absolute best in her studies and understand the positions of Black (majority) Africans in white (minority)-governed Rhodesia, Nyasha "eats" books, but she cannot stomach food. Her bulimia is two-fold. She binges on books, but cannot purge the information; she binges on food because her father forces her to eat. She purges to control her weight so she will be like European models, a symptom of her assimilation. It is also a practice in self-discipline and self-control. How can she find the balance between good rebel and good kaffir? She is obsessive about her books, exams, and her body; if she cannot control her world—her father's crouching and her mother's self-erasure—she can at least control her eating and learning. Paradoxically, books are the primary tools for subjugating the learned. The educated few are kept in check in different ways than the uneducated masses. As Memmi points out, books "talk to him of a world which in no way reminds him of his own" (105).

Nyasha continues, "There's a whole lot more. I've tried to keep it in but it's powerful. It ought to be. There's nearly a century of it" (200). Nyasha's madness is of epic proportion. She embraces a century of European



oppression. (Incidentally, at the time the European presence in Rhodesia is approximately 100 years old). Her madness is a powerhouse that must out for her to begin to effectively manage and balance the struggle between traditional values and assimilation.

Nyasha's madness results from her inability to cope with her identity crisis, conflicting histories, and the clash of cultures. She goes crazy because she cannot make a whole of the two halves of her identity. Furthermore, she goes mad because of what she considers the illogic or madness of societal and familial structure. When severe discipline of mind and body does not solve her problems, Nyasha's coping mechanisms crumble and she is left with none of the answers she seeks and is defeated. Her breakdown comes from mental exhaustion. She has had quite a time since returning to Africa: She does not fit. Her father expects her to become suddenly African. She does not know the language of the people.<sup>4</sup> She dresses differently. She fights with her father daily. Smoking does not calm her nerves, nor does bingeing and purging or studying. Her stressors are found in the conflict of European and African values, her mother's self-effacement,

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<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Tambu's mom believes Nyasha goes crazy because of too much "English" and the fact that she does not know her native language.

her own sense of displacement; she contemplates each so deeply that she collapses.

Lucy's mental collapse also comes out of a similar imbalance. It is complete and utter madness that Lucy seeks to obliterate her memory—to have a past, but live in the present without it. The illogic and impossibility of her endeavor comes crashing full force on her and she is forced to face the madness that she has been living. We see Nyasha's madness coming, and Pecola chooses hers, but Lucy's entire experience in the US comes out of her madness. In the crowning act of her madness, Lucy writes her mother a letter telling her that she has become the slut she has been steered away from becoming.

Lucy's sexual avarice, like Nyasha's anorexia-bulimia, is an attempt—at self-control. Neither girl wants to be like her mother—beautiful, brilliant women, full of the capacity to rule and control, but who have no control over their own circumstances and lives. In Lucy's efforts to escape homeland and mother she accepts American assimilation, and in that acceptance finds the "sameness in everything." She wills her body but not her heart. And it is this realization which leads to her minor breakdown near the end of the novel: I wish I could love someone so much that I would die from it.

But Lucy does love. Her madness impedes her recognition of that love and the profound effect of that love on her life. Her intense enmeshment with her mother, seeing herself as a miniature of her mother ("Little Miss") and adopting her mother's stance and mannerisms, diminishes her ability to form her own identity. Recognizing this, Lucy seeks to detach from her mother, but in so doing, she moves toward madness. She sees the world only in extremes, in black and white. From the very beginning of the novel, when she informs us that sun means warm weather (and she is shocked when it is cold outside), Lucy introduces us to her world of extremes:

Past	Present
Person I was	Person I am
Mother	Mariah
Evil British	Good Americans
Old	New

This extreme view of the world manifests itself in her relationships with others. These relationships are immediately intense. Peggy and she become fast friends and even go home and kiss each other when they cannot find a man who appeals to them. Mariah becomes a surrogate mother, but in an instant, when these relationships become too familiar, too familial, Lucy dismisses both relationships and moves on. She is also self-destructive in her sexual promiscuity. Men are simply props for her to

seek revenge against her mother. Lucy transfers her hatred for the British to her mother and transfers her inability to love—and hate her mother at the same time to herself. Her sexual permissiveness, rather than being a sign of her independence, is a symptom of her woundedness. She does not speak of especially enjoying sex per se or of being devoted to any of her male partners. Instead she speaks of sex distantly, of sexual sensations, of her young experiences with touching and kissing. Speaking of her current sex acts is usually juxtaposed with an observation or critique of the British or her mother's body politics.

Her father forces Pecola's first sex act upon her, and it is the very thing that compels her to choose between her normal life and madness. Her madness comes out of the trauma of her dark-skinned existence and her father's rape. When she gets her first period, Claudia and Frieda tell her that she can now have a baby. She asks how and they tell her somebody has to love you. In her extreme despair, she asks, "How do you get somebody to love you?" The heartbreaking question she asks is not one that comes because she wants to have a baby. It comes because nobody loves Pecola and because Pecola is forced to undergo harsh indignities daily simply because she is a little dark skinned Black girl. She is hurt and angered by this fact.

She is consumed by it. Pecola, belonging to a family of social outcasts, is befriended by few and molested by her father, who recognizes in her a weakness that attracted him to his now cold and detached wife. It is when the seed he planted in her dies that Pecola decides to act on her own behalf, to stop waiting for the miracle that Soaphead Church promises, to cease waiting for God to give her blue eyes. She steps over into madness and the bluest eyes become hers. She then engages a disintegrated self--this other voice, a former Pecola--in a discussion about these blue eyes. This voice antagonizes Pecola about the rape and reminds her of what she has "seen" before she attains the blue eyes. Pecola is defensive with this former self and voice and determines to possess the bluest eyes to eliminate the voice of an ugly past.

It is not so necessary to "name" Nyasha's, Pecola's, and Lucy's madnesses (post-traumatic stress, decompensation, splitting, and borderline personality disorder) as it is to understand the causes of them. However, Nyasha's disorder seems to fall between decompensation and nervous breakdown. Although, as mentioned earlier, nervous breakdown is not an official clinical diagnosis, it refers to "a condition of anxious or depressive collapse or overwhelm" in response to

significant stressful life events. Similarly, decompensation means to "fall apart mentally and emotionally" and usually occurs during the onset of a psychotic process. But non-psychotic persons may decompensate when the stressors they are faced with are greater than their coping abilities can manage (DSM-IV).

Nyasha functions capably and admirably until her breakdown. The stress of her removal from England, the Shona cultural demands, and the new family dynamic as well as her father's attacks on her character and independence are far too much for far-minded Nyasha. She is capable of coping only until Tambu leaves.

Pecola, like Nyasha, decompensates, but she decompensates as a result of post-traumatic stress syndrome, which is brought on by the rape. She further dissociates, the psychological process involving "alterations of attention and memory so as to create alterations in identity or sense of self" (DSM-IV). Pecola grasps her blue eyes in a thwarted attempt to eradicate the negative emotions associated with being a Breedlove as well as to eliminate the shame she lives for not only having seen her "daddynaked" but unfortunately having the sexual implications of a daughter seeing her father naked fulfilled when he rapes her.

Furthermore, the very reality that the Breedloves breed no love is fully realized when Pecola loses her father's child. The fact that she is raped by her father and then loses the evidence that she is loved pushes Pecola to choose blue eyes, the last guarantee for love. Racial trauma and familial trauma combined convey Pecola to madness.

Lucy's disorders, though mild, are no less threatening. At the sight of her name written in her own handwriting, Lucy falls apart. But splitting and enmeshment bring on the decompensation. As noted earlier, Lucy tends to see the world and individuals in Black and white terms. Perhaps Lucy's splitting is attached to her enmeshment with her mother. Enmeshment refers to a condition "where two or more people weave their lives and identities around one another so tightly that it is difficult for any one of them to function independently" (DSMV-IV). Lucy's love for her mother is so intense and she is so connected to her mother that Lucy seeks to detach herself from her mother, which is the opposite extreme. Neither is normal, healthy or balanced.

#### Tug

*I was brought up to understand that English traditions were right and mine were wrong. Within the life of an English*

person there was always clarity, and within an English culture there was always clarity, but within my life and culture was ambiguity. A person who is dead in England is dead. A person where I come from who is dead might not be dead. I was taught to think of ambiguity as magic, as shadiness and as illegitimacy, not the real thing of Western civilization.

Jamaica Kincaid, Missouri Review Interview

In African, Caribbean, and African American societies there exist two separate and often distinct worlds which impinge upon the social, psychological and emotional development of young people—the accepted or legitimate culture of the (former) colonizer and the culture which reflects the way people really live and act; and the culture which grows out of that of the African ancestors which has survived through transfer and continual transformation.

The very reality of living in these two worlds makes tradition and assimilation troubling and ambiguous concepts, particularly in reference to teenage girls several generations removed from the "untainted" culture. On the one hand, tradition requires adherence to cultural rules and customs, which are often devoid of meaning because times and circumstances have changed. Sometimes there has been no transformation, only a transfer of rituals and routine behavior, and individuals have little



if any choice in these matters of tradition; tradition demands conformity. In *Nervous Conditions*, the "ritual greeting" in which elders, particularly the "patriarchy" must be greeted and served in order of importance and age and gender and status, falls apart when disagreement erupts when it is no longer clear who carries the most weight. For instance, the servant in Babamukuru's household ritually greets and serves Tambu and Nyasha, who are much younger than she. The girls are uncomfortable with this "respect" for their social "superiority" in light of the servant's age and ask her to stop.

But tradition is also that which we are at core, when all the new ideas and practices have been stripped away—it is the way we really are. When neither Pecola's mother nor her recently freed-from-prison father, Cholly, do anything to show their faces while Pecola is living with the MacTeers, Mrs. MacTeer, Claudia's and Frieda's mother, laments the broken tradition of "peep[ing] in to see that your child has a loaf of bread" and the absence of the basic courtesies involved in living in someone else's home and not drinking all the milk (22-23).

While tradition requires that our characters adhere to basic rules of decorum within their cultural spaces, the call for them to assimilate in other ways (appearance,

education, and speech in particular) brings strife and confusion to their personalities. Assimilation requires, in Trinh T. Minh-ha's terms, that one person, typically of the minority group, "be like" some larger accepted norm. Destined only to imitate, she is expected to revere everything she is not and can never really be.<sup>5</sup> Thus, there is a schism between the ways cultural tradition is perceived and the ways ideas of assimilation are pushed on the characters.

Nyasha comes from a tradition (pre-colonial African) in which patrilineal and matrilineal relations were equally important—where women and men served in different capacities, but were not necessarily subjected to the hierarchical relations we are so familiar with in the West. However she is ordered to uphold Western traditions because "good" white people "rescued" her family from poverty and "evil" white people by educating Babamukuru. The traditions that she is ordered to uphold as African traditions had only evolved since colonization. Similarly, Lucy's childhood is bound by constraints of cultural evolution due mostly to the West. Her Black home is a little "England" and she is forced to learn more about England than about her own small island home. Further

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<sup>5</sup> See Trinh's *Woman Native Other* for further explanation.

erased by her mother's self-effacement, Lucy attempts to detach herself to make herself a whole person (again). Pecola, on the other hand, moves and operates in an American subculture whose traditions carry the resonance of the African motherland, but are ever-evolving. She operates in a native land that values beauty as everything she is not: blonde, blue eyes, and rosy cheeks. For Americans, tradition is a troubling and unstable concept. For African Americans in particular—even though it seems traditions are firmly placed and immovable—traditions are tentative, contingent, and reinterpreted every day because of our vast differences in socialization and environment.

Nyasha finds conformity to neither tradition nor assimilation palatable—tradition because it requires her being under man's rule; assimilation because it requires her being under white man's rule. Her indecision and search for a middle ground between the two is made more difficult by her own father's confusion—be African in behavior but be like the British in education. In her quest to make sense of these conflicting directives, Nyasha retreats further and further inward. She is "anglicized," Maiguru explains, and it is "taking time to learn how to behave at home again" (74). Even more telling is Nyasha's explanation. "Now they are stuck with hybrids for children.

And they don't like it . . . It offends them" (78).

Nyasha's classmates perceive her struggle differently. They say she thinks she is "white;" she is "loose" and "proud" (94). Loose and proud seem to be traits she picked up from the British, for Babamukuru accuses her of the same and insists that she lose these British ways and give him the "patriarchal" respect he is due. Furthermore, the two entities operate in favor of males. Nyasha, like Tambu, is astute enough to see that "the needs and sensibilities of the women in my family were not considered a priority or even legitimate" (12).

Nyasha begins to consume history in her endeavor to understand her present circumstances and to "not forget" the hows and whys of those circumstances. She is not impressed with her father, nor is she impressed with the white missionaries who "rescued" him and "allow" him to care for his own people. For Nyasha, the process of assimilation is the process of forgetting. She tries to be a "good girl," but far-minded Nyasha realizes that she would only be giving in to her father's definition and the white definition of a "good girl" and in the process she would forget. In her desperation to "not forget" or lose control of a forming, independent and assertive identity, Nyasha moves closer and closer to losing her mind.

After learning of Tambu's acceptance into and of a convent education, Nyasha tests Tambu on various levels and seeks to appeal to an emerging sense of duty to self:

It would be a marvellous opportunity, she said sarcastically, to forget. To forget why you were, what you were and why you were that. The process, she said, was called assimilation, and that was what was intended for the precocious few who might prove a nuisance if left to themselves, whereas the others—well really, who cared about the others? So they made the little space into which you were assimilated, an honorary space in which you could join them and they could make sure that you behaved yourself. (179)

Nyasha's statement in its defining the process of assimilation suggests the continuum of the (post)colonial subject position(s) which Memmi speaks of in his *The Colonizer and the Colonized*: the colonized who refuses and the colonized who accepts—the good Black person who accepts what the colonial/(post)colonial masters give without question; those who assimilate for social or personal advancement but recognize their "place" in colonial society, especially in relation to the whites—those who forget. Forgetting can also be interpreted in a number of ways. It is assimilation that Nyasha speaks of at heart—what it does to the individual and what it does to the soul of a nation, a culture, a people. What the act of becoming assimilated is doing to her even: even as she struggles against it, as the internal turmoil literally eats her up!

Nyasha repeatedly decries the effects of assimilation in her nationplace. In fact, it is the reason she cannot bring herself to respect her father. The holy "wizards," as her paternal grandmother calls the white missionaries who took an interest in Mukuma Seguiake, dictate how he lives, how he spends his money, and how he interacts with his family. He is African behind their backs, but only in a limited way, only when being African involves homage to his exalted state. But he cannot "allow" witchcraft or obeah on the homestead where Tambu's family lives because it is unChristian and unWestern. He also cannot allow Tambu's mother and father to go on "living in sin." For although they have been married in the traditional African way for many, many years, they must be married in the Christian way for this marriage to be acknowledged by heaven and by him (and read: the white missionaries). The "little space" which the colonizer provides seems to be the major bone of contention. It is a point of access to the privileges of the white world for a token few—the chosen. Out of this chosen is expected good behavior-modeling, conformity, and absolutely no inkling of self-assertion or critique. Nyasha recognizes that her father is "nearly" one of them and her being his daughter and her education, by virtue, make her one of the chosen—something over which

she has no control, so she cannot understand why Tambu would choose this path and is incensed that the path might also be hers. Yet Nyasha does not complain about benefiting from her privileges—the pretty clothes, short skirts, big house, and popularity.

The anger and agony expressed in Nyasha's statement, referenced several pages earlier, echoes through all of Kincaid's texts; *Lucy* is no exception. But neither Lucy nor Nyasha is content with being "well-behaved;" neither is content with assimilation. In some ways, Lucy is a lot more complex than Nyasha. Nyasha is straightforward and lucid in working through her perplexities and conflicts. Lucy is vocal about things that are apparently simple—the sun and cold, daffodils, her impressions of and reactions to people, the way things feel and smell, the height of a wife in relation to her husband. She says a lot but does not appear to say much that is substantive. She is complex because she eschews tradition and assimilation in her homeplace, but seems to welcome it in America. She is complex because there is a politics of domination behind each of her observations and a politics of family that she wants to erase.

Lucy wants to forget. She comes to America to forget. She wants a past, a new identity detached from her mother's

sexual politics as well as the prevalence of "Britishness" in her small island home. Lucy cannot understand, for instance, why she was forced to learn at age 10 a poem about daffodils when she did not even see a daffodil till she was 19 years old living in America. Nevertheless, Lucy does understand the politics of that reality, she understands the politics of a place that would have her sing "Rule, Britannia, Britannia rule the waves. Britons never, never shall be slaves" when she is not British and until recently her people were slaves. The violence done to her naturally nonconformist psyche through education, and the damage done to her homeplace through violence and threats of violence are evident in her dangerous rebellion in the United States. For Lucy, the way to revolt against her mother's Anglo-Victorian values is to become the slut she has been steered away from becoming, to ignore her mother's letters and existence, and to forget the island home, though she will never be able to call any other place home—even if she never goes back. But Lucy's plan backfires and she finds herself in the same place where she started, and she realizes with her breakdown in the very last lines of the novel that she has waged war against herself as well.



The disturbing reality is that Nyasha's and Lucy's persistence in remembering and/or forgetting leads them exactly where they do not want to be: to assimilation. It is the inconsistencies in their own characters, their own love-hate that drives them near madness. Lucy, desperate to erase her past, says:

I had begun to see the past like this: there is a line: you can draw it yourself, or sometimes it gets drawn for you; either way, there it is, your past, a collection of people you used to be and things you used to do. Your past is the person you no longer are, the situations you are no longer in. (137)

Although Nyasha is speaking of remembering in her address to Tambu and Lucy is speaking of forgetting, the two are speaking of the very same foe: Britishness, colonialism, the replacement of traditional values for colonial values, the exchange of cultural expression through speech, dress, moral values for something foreign to the native culture; the assumption that British is better than, more beautiful than, more intelligent, has a better language than a "small island" and pre-Independent Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). Lucy struggles to forget Britishness; Nyasha struggles to remember African-ness. England is the thing they always return to in one way or another. Nyasha's and Lucy's own assimilation are manifest in other ways: Nyasha's in her

dress and manner, the books she reads, in her inability to speak the Shona language and her excitement over M'Shingayi's and Jeremiah's wedding ceremony; Lucy's in her firmly embracing the American sexual attitudes of the late 1960's. The inconsistencies in the characters' personalities are both troubling and fascinating--troubling because they are incongruent with the characters' obvious brilliance, fascinating because the inconsistencies somehow magnify their brilliance.

While all three characters are definitely involved in self-reinvention, Pecola's situation epitomizes Lucy's earlier statement: Your past is the person you no longer are, the situations you are no longer in. Pecola's blue eyes give her a past. Pecola seeks to gain this past through her blue eyes. She is the embodiment of assimilation gone awry. Morrison gives us two distinct family units, the MacTeers and the Breedloves; all live in the dichotomous Black world of the early 40's: light skin/dark skin; good hair/bad hair; haves/haves not (as illustrated through Rosemary Villanucci, the girl who lives next door to Frieda and Claudia, and Maureen Peal).<sup>6</sup> The standards of beauty they accept come from generations of

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<sup>6</sup> Of course, implicit in these dichotomies is that light skin and good-wavy or straight-hair as opposed to curly or kinky, is that what is closest to white is always better than what is close to Black.

being persuaded through various means (the Institution of Slavery, movie depictions, Shirley Temple) that white-is beautiful.

Everyone around Pecola degrades her Blackness. Aside from daily life with Pauline and Cholly Breedlove, three specific instances exemplify the misery that catapults her into madness:

(1) On her way home from school one day, she is encircled by a group of boys who chant: Black e mo, Black e mo, yourdaddysleepsnaked. Victims themselves, these boys further victimize our victim. Their hatred for Pecola's Blackness is a revelation of their own self-hatred, but it is so entrenched that they see no connection between their own skin color and the "offensiveness" of Pecola's. They also add salt to her injury by calling her father's behavior into question. This is particularly problematic for Pecola as revealed in her defensive tone with Maureen Peal. Pecola's father does sleep naked, and one of the unpretty scenes her eyes are forced to see is the struggle between her mother and naked father because he would not get firewood for the house.

(2) Related to this incident is Maureen Peal's affirmation of her ugliness. After Maureen rescues Pecola from the boys and assuages her pain with ice cream, a

discussion about boys' anatomy becomes twisted when Pecola's trauma rears its head. Maureen asks if anyone's ever seen a penis. Pecola begins to defend herself from the reality that she has seen her father's penis, and Claudia and Frieda, jealous over the ice cream, launch into an attack of Maureen. In response, Maureen runs across the street and yells out "I *am* cute and you're all ugly Black e mos". Her statement brings to their consciousness the dreadful possibility of the accuracy of her assessment that they are ugly because they do not look like her. Maureen Peal is light-skinned with long brown hair. She has green eyes and is very well dressed. There is clearly a contrast drawn between the light-skinned world of the haves and the dark-skinned world of the have-nots. Neither Pecola nor her younger friend Claudia has a vocabulary, or even a historical or cultural knowledge, to grasp the reasons for these splits. Claudia's self esteem is healthy enough to know this is a question that has an answer, but Pecola accepts it at face value and wishes to change her circumstances by changing her appearance.

(3) The third experience that further demoralizes Pecola is the incident with Geraldine, a mischievous schoolmate's mother. On her way home one day, she decides to take a shortcut through the park. There she encounters

Junior who lures her to his home with the promise of playing with kittens. After trying to torture her, he holds her hostage in a room and leaves her with his mother's beloved black cat that has shocking bright blue eyes. When he realizes that Pecola is enjoying the cat's company, he struggles with her over the cat, and as a result, kills the cat. His mother, Geraldine, who worked very hard to create a clean environment detached from any association with lower class 'Blackdom,' comes home. The boy lies and tells her Pecola killed her cat. She hurls insults at Pecola. She adds to ugly, nasty and implies that dark skinned girls are no-good and nasty, thus completing the circle of stereotypes hurled at Black women.

The self-hatred of Blacks creates for Pecola a mean-spirited and cruel world. There is a certain degree of madness involved in being a dark-skinned Black woman in America. The veneration of whiteness and the denigration of Blackness as unseemliness and impurity put her in an untenable place. She is perceived as undesirable, unappealing, unloving, conniving, no-good and nasty. Pecola is only 11, but the acceptance of such stereotypes come crashing upon her 11 year old soul, and all she wants is to relieve her suffering. Maybe, if she looked more like the little white girls, her world could change. She

is too young to grasp for a different end to her suffering. Claudia is sharp, and she and Frieda want to help desperately, but it is outside of their physical and psychological means to assist Pecola on her journey to womanhood through the racial pitfalls.

A Man Only in Form: WAR

*To a large extent the evil-doers have succeeded in producing at the output end of their machine a kind of Black man who is a man only in form.*

Steven Biko, I Write What I Like

The girls' tug-o-war is most evident within the family circle. The family, whether mother or father or both, act to keep certain structures in place, to make sure the family falls in line with the adopted culture.

Outwardly, it appears the girls wage war against their families. Nyasha and Lucy in particular question their parents' assimilation and internalization of racist assumptions and principles. Nyasha, who is a bit more intellectual and less angry than Lucy, pinpoints colonial politics as the cause of the disruption and chaos in her family. Even Pecola recognizes that the racial scale is tipped in favor of the white race and just maybe if she possessed blue eyes, Mrs. Breedlove would treat her with the care with which she treats the little white girl of the family for which she works. Maybe her parents, so broken

down by the racial tenor of the country, would start doing pretty things, good things before her pretty blue eyes.

The racial and (post)colonial re-education or re-indoctrination of the homeplace alters the power dynamics of the family. Neither Jeremiah nor Babamukuru is a man in the sense that he would have been in pre-colonial Africa. Neither is Lucy's unnamed father. Neither is Cholly, Pecola's father. Their manhood and their fatherhood have been deeply and, in some cases, irrevocably affected by colonial contact. Just as those who are colonized value European and American music, education, art and forms of government, they also seek to mimic the Western hierarchical structure of the family, but because the psychologies of the families differ, the structure is thrown into chaos or at the very least is inconsistent and incongruous. The Western family-culture hierarchy (Man, woman, boychild, girlchild) displaces the equally powerful matrilineal role of Africana cultures and leaves gaps in the family psychology. These gaps are notable in the relationships between father and daughter and mother and daughter in each novel. Even more notable is the psychological schism the girls themselves experience on contact with the white world. For them there is no clear

definition of normal behavior. In fact, Fanon comments on this very phenomenon in "The Negro and Psychopathology:"

In Europe the family represents in effect a certain fashion in which the world presents itself to the child. There are close connections between the structure of the family and the structure of the nation. Militarization and the centralization of authority in a country automatically entail a resurgence of the authority of the father. In Europe and in every country characterized as civilized or civilizing, the family is a miniature of the nation. As the child emerges from the shadow of his parents, he finds himself once more among the same laws, the same principles, the same values. A normal child that has grown up in a normal family will be a normal man. (142)

Conversely, "A normal Negro child, having grown up within a normal family, will become abnormal on the slightest contact with the white world" (*Black Skin* 143).

For Fanon "normal" seems to have two meanings. For a white family normal has to mean in harmony with the laws, values, and principles of the nation. For a Black family and child, this has to mean something else. What is a normal Negro child, growing up in a normal family? Is the normal family the one that has had colonial contact or is it the one that has not—if there is such a thing? In spite of an imposition of colonial values, many Black families have retained Africentric values and principles or at least have intermingled the principles and have come to some conclusions and practices that are not exclusively African



or European. Furthermore, the "Negro" child becomes abnormal because she is an Other in the white world. She sees it immediately or she feels it if she cannot see it. "Militarization and centralization" of authority do not point to her father's role and position. In most instances, her Black father's authority as head of a household/head of a mini-nation is completely undermined by all she sees on contact with the white world. She sees her father, in Nyasha and Pecola's cases, capitulating to other men and finds this disturbing. Is this normal behavior for a man? Particularly, when these men rule, and are even gods, in their own households?

As a result of this normal-abnormal rupture all of the characters that I discuss primarily and a few of the secondary characters are involved in a triangle of sorts with their parents—anger directed at the mother because even in their own words they do not meet their daughters' expectations of power based on their own brilliance, and they do not instill said authority in their daughters. Moreover, these girls do not look to their fathers: Lucy is not impressed with the way her father (ab)uses his "power" to produce more than 30 children through extramarital affairs; nor is Nyasha (she is disappointed), nor is Pecola (she is raped), for it is not she who crossed

the line between parent and child, but her father. Despite the girls' recognition that their mothers do not exercise power and their fathers do so in limited and destructive ways, their dilemma is further complicated because they also recognize that in the apartheid-colonial scheme of things, their fathers are impotent and castrated. If a penis equals man equals power, if having a penis or being male guarantees power, their fathers have no penis nor are they men.

Nyasha often describes her father as bowing down or crouching before the white colonials. Pecola's father in despair over his daughter's vulnerability and weakness, rapes her more than once in a twisted expression of his love for her. Lucy's rarely mentioned father is barely a presence in her life. These men are products and victims of the ambiguous society in which they live. They are constructed against and respond to hundreds of years of racial and cultural oppression, and in some ways do not know how to be a man—a Black man in particular. Having taken many cues from the white men, who ruled over them, they exact authority in their homes through rigor, violence, and unfaithfulness.

Biko's statement cited at section heading (To a large extent the evil-doers have succeeded in producing at the

output end of their machine a kind of Black man who is a man only in form) rings true in each text. When Tambudzai/Nyasha's paternal grandmother tells the family history, she speaks of being taken advantage of by whites, having property taken away and having to work enslaved for evil wizards (whites) until the holy wizards (good whites, missionaries) came and chose Babamukuru for education and to elevate the family. She, like Tambu and Jeremiah and most other family members, is grateful to the whites for this. But Nyasha and M'Shingayi, Tambu's mother, recognize another motive. They have "robbed us of each other" and they are taking us away from our family and our culture and our minds. American racism is simply emasculating. Cholly is an unfortunate victim. His manhood is challenged when he is a teenager caught by white racist men while having his first sexual encounter with Darlene, another pubescent teenager. Consensual sex became rape of his budding manhood when the white men forced him to "finish" in their presence. Cholly, abandoned by both mother and father and raised by a Great Aunt. The only thing he can give is his sex. He does so violently and unacceptably.

Male empowerment issues are troubling in each novel. Babamukuru, physically and literally, fights Nyasha like a man. Cholly attempts to redeem his manhood and molests his

daughter and terrorizes the household through his drunken violence. Lucy's father has more than 30 children. The confusing ways their mothers handle this male power also disturbs our characters.

However, the girls still look to their mothers for something, some answer to their overwhelming dilemma. When their mothers do not answer this need, the girls seek to break away from their mothers and lean closer to madness.

Nancy Chodorow contends that girls need connection to their mothers to grow. In an analysis of Freud's Oedipus Complex theory, Chodorow contends that girls want or need the phallus for "the power which it symbolizes and the freedom it promises from her previous sense of dependence, and not because it is inherently and obviously better to be masculine" (123). There is something worth examining here not as far as penis envy is concerned but as far as "privilege (of the penis) envy" is concerned—not of possessing a penis but of claiming heir to the privileges associated with having one. While Tambu sees her oppression as simply male, particularly because only her brother (who fortunately for her died while at school) is to be educated because he is not only older but male, Nyasha and Lucy see that their situations are a bit more complex than male and female hierarchies.

Tambu, Nyasha, Lucy are schooled by their mothers' words and experience on their role as future women in Africana society. The suppression of her own brilliance and independence in deference to a man's "natural" authority is appealing to neither girl. It is not even appealing to the mothers of these girls. It is for this reason that Nyasha's mother reaches her breaking point, for this reason that Tambu's mother reaches her breaking point.

The very reality of their personal prison and a look at what their futures might hold based on their mothers' positions push all three girls to the proverbial edge. The superiority of maleness over femaleness and the education and comfort of men instead of or at the expense of women drives the plot of each novel. There are few options available to the girls. Merle Hodge, in "Young Women and the Development of Stable Family Life in the Caribbean," writes that there are only two options available to West Indian girls—get married or get pregnant (41).<sup>7</sup>

Both Tambu's mother and father tell her that education will ruin her for marriage. Her father—needing money donated for her education and claiming that anything given to his daughter for whatever reason is his—counters that no

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<sup>7</sup> This particular essay (Savacou, Volume 13, 1977) speaks positively on the role of the extended family in the Caribbean and argues that it is a more desirable structure than the "tight little nuclear family" of Western society.

woman returns to elevate her own family, but leaves and helps her husband's family. Maiguru, who does just this, exemplifies his point. Tambu herself idealizes Maiguru's role-presuming that since she is educated and makes her own money, her role as "matriarch" is parallel to and equal to Babamukuru's patriarchal role. She is thrown off kilter when self-effacing Maiguru finally deserts her husband because she can no longer tolerate the submissive role assigned to her. Nyasha breathes a sigh of relief and applauds her mother's newfound voice. She herself is encouraged to be educated but is discouraged as a woman from having her own opinions and acting for herself. Any comment she makes--no matter how trivial--is treated as a threat to Babamukuru's authority. And her progressing anorexia-bulimia is seen not for the illness it is but a challenge to his authority. Tambu and Maiguru recognize that something is not right with Nyasha, but her father sees it as her independence trying to assert itself when there is no room for "two men in the family." Nyasha recognizes the dysfunctional characteristics present in her family; she criticizes both parents for their lack of personal power and fortitude. Babamukuru is pomp and circumstance, a puppet in the hands of the holy wizards who educated him and Maiguru is a construct, playing out a role

prescribed for her as wife of the "chosen one." Nyasha and her father are involved in an internecine struggle for control. Babamukuru fights her like a man and she holds her own, but she is still no better off.

Lucy recognizes her mother's brilliance and feels betrayed when her parents forsake her education and development for the three brothers who come (much) later in her life. It is at this betrayal that Lucy begins to fall out of love with her mother.

While education is not an issue for a profoundly poor African American child to whom education, though segregated, is available and free, Pecola experiences sexual typecasting and role-playing in different ways. American racism is hard and especially emasculating. Pauline Breedlove keeps house for a white family, but we are not sure Cholly Breedlove even works—he spends time in bars, in jail, beating his wife and terrorizing his family. Pauline Breedlove, equally disempowered and self-hated, feeds and feeds off her husband's despair and is just as impotent in empowering her daughter as the two mothers previously discussed. Her white world validates her—gives her a nickname and even seeks to rescue her.<sup>8</sup> Pauline never speaks loving words to her daughter nor does she speak to

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<sup>8</sup> One of her lady bosses promises to help her out if she leaves Cholly

her lovingly. She viciously chastises Pecola for disrupting the order of her white world and the security of her white "daughter." Pauline—filled with images from picture shows—believes like Pecola that white skin, blue eyes, and straight hair brings comfort, peace, happiness, and love, and though she has no control over her Black skin or kinky hair, she feels in control of the white woman's kitchen—the little part of their world they offer to her, though at a very high price.

Unfortunately, Pecola, not Pauline, pays the visible price. Her mother is a stereotypical mammy, wrapping her warm arms around her white family so tight that she has no love or warmth left for her own. Considering Pecola is her daughter, a little image of herself, one might assume that she would seek to rescue her daughter from the despair she herself finds in living, poor, Black, and unattractive. The Breedloves breed just the opposite of love.

In all societies mothers are expected to fulfill certain roles; in African societies in particular one of the roles is to prepare the daughter and empower her for her own culture. In reference to Caribbean societies in particular, Merle Hodge writes in her introduction to Erna Brodber's *Perception of Caribbean Women: Toward a Documentation of Stereotypes* (1982):



(What emerges from these novels in general is) the tension between official and real culture, with the child living that tension every day of its life—the discrepancy between school and home, between the culture of books, newspapers and religious instruction and the culture practiced by the adults with whom the child is most intimately involved who are chiefly responsible for the transmitting to the child the mores of the tribe: mother, grandmother, aunt [. . .]. (viii)

Speaking primarily on African American mothers and daughters, Patricia Hill Collins adds:

Black mothers of daughters face a troubling dilemma. On one hand, to ensure their daughters' physical survival, mothers must teach them to fit into systems of oppression [. . .] On the other hand, Black daughters with strong self-definitions and self-valuations who offer serious challenges to oppressive situations may not physically survive . . . Despite the dangers, mothers routinely encourage Black daughters to develop skills to confront oppressive conditions [. . .]. Emotional strength is essential, but not at the cost of physical survival. (123-124)

These passages say essentially that it is the mothers who prepare the daughters for the journey from a confusing childhood to a stable adulthood. If we accept these social principles, then it is not so shocking to find our daughters in such dire straits. The mothers are brilliant women—at least Annie and Maiguru are—but they are impotent, dispossessed of the power to prepare their daughters for the journey of survival, for the survival of the culture.

Both Maiguru and Pauline seek to empower themselves, but their battle is also their daughters' battles.

Unfortunately, they cannot see through it to their daughters' real struggle. At least Maiguru senses Nyasha's spiritual turmoil, but she diminishes it to avoid any conflict with Babamukuru. She must first learn to claim her own personal space before she can begin to properly "train" her daughter for survival in a male-dominated system. Nyasha sees her mother's maternalism toward her as bothersome and pesky, as a method to circumvent upsetting the distribution of power in the family. Nyasha wants her, needs her to fight back. When she does fight back by leaving her husband, Nyasha is proud, though disappointed because she thought her mother's leave would be permanent or at least last more than a few days. She does not see the changes in her mother. And on many levels she rejects her mother. Nyasha attempts to prepare herself for the journey. She bounces ideas off of Tambu and when Tambu is gone, there is no one to keep her from internalizing the struggle. Because she does not see her mother as empowered or even as an ally, she refuses to turn to her. In the same way and for the same reason that Lucy rejects hers—for not validating her as a Black woman, for not defending her

against a societal system that empowers men at the expense of women.

Annie Potter is more aggressive than Maiguru in passing on survival skills to her daughter. She is so successful that she ends up with a carbon copy of herself—until the brothers are born. Then, Annie places her hope for the future in her sons instead. Lucy tries to sever this relationship because it is too close, too internalized—not because her mother's preparation does not prepare her for the journey. Her mother's preparation is over-adequate, overwhelming, too careful, too British, too Victorian, and Lucy feels none of it has anything to do with her. She wants a mother who defies cultural expectations and encourages her to fly in the face of convention, tradition, and the politics of domination that cripple and stifle women's power and voices.

Maiguru and Annie teach their daughters that to survive they must be silent. Since they do not teach them how to use subversive strategies to dismantle the power structures or at least work around them (because they themselves do not know how), their daughters openly and obviously question or threaten and endanger their own mental health.

Unlike Annie, Pauline does nothing for her daughter. Unlike Maiguru, she does not even wish to do so. Mrs. Breedlove is impotent because she is resigned to her own ugliness, and this is the attitude she passes on to her daughter. Her whole outlook and struggle revolves around salvaging her own wounded soul and making sure she survives. Pecola receives no love, no gentle words, no hugs, no instruction for survival, no validation of her brown skin and brown eyes. In this case the mother rejects the daughter. So when Pecola is traumatized by her father's rape, she has nowhere to turn but to her imaginary blue eyes that open for her a world of beauty and acceptance.

Although all three girls do have support systems, none of these women are "grown" enough or themselves healthy enough to prepare our girls for the journey, which is arduous and politicized. Despite their political impotence, these mothers fail to do what they can do for their daughters—to indoctrinate them—teach them the culture. Thus their passage from childhood to womanhood leaves them confused and angered, which translates into feelings of powerlessness and inadequacy, feelings that they have loss control of their own circumstances. This then leads to being out of the control of others.

In Africa *Wo/man Palava*, Chikwenye Okunjo Ogunyemi collapses the Igbo *Chi* and the Yoruba *Ori* into *chi/ori*, a female principle that encourages the individual to "glean steadfastly information on the systemic ordering of life" (34).<sup>9</sup> She further describes it as the mother within, a guiding principle that "eases the painful individuation process necessary for maturity" (35). The *chi/ori* is essentially a "powerhouse lodged within" (33-36). It is implied that there must be a connection with a physical mother for the mother within to guide. The absence of mothers who lead them on the journey causes Lucy, Pecola, and Nyasha to rely solely on the mother within. Without the connection with the mothers, they cannot make a smooth transition away from her and the individuation process is too extreme. The matter is further complicated because their concern is beyond separating from their mothers and becoming women. They internalize the politics of several cultures and overload the work of their *chi/ori* through their struggle between traditional values and adopted values. While Lucy and Nyasha in Africa and the Caribbean find themselves in angry dialogue with and wavering between

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<sup>9</sup> In Nigeria, *Chi*, is one's personal god or life-force within. One can have a good *chi* or a bad *chi*. Therefore, when a person does not prosper or fails at everything, it is believed that he has a bad *chi* and vice versa. *Ori* is one of four hundred *orisha* (gods, deities), generally perceived as male.

tradition (because of its strict demands on women) and assimilation (because of its strict demands on native cultures), Pecola daily lives the reality of self-hatred and non-acceptance which Lucy and Nyasha attempt to escape. Each character through varying degrees of madness attempts to understand and know the who I am, and each character attempts to claim some ounce of control over her own circumstances, and each character grasps power in some form to make things happen.

Nyasha's madness, which is revealed through her obsessive, perfectionist behavior impairs her, but her madness compels us to engage the difficult questions associated with bi-culturality. Lucy, though not exactly mad, is driven by madness to eradicate her past. This madness, in the end, empowers her, because once she is able to realize that the past is an integral part of who she is, she can begin to accept that she is very much like her mother and can recover the relationship and herself through a normal individuation process and not one that leaves her so open and vulnerable. Furthermore, Lucy begins to understand her connection to the colonial past of her island home. Pecola's drive for blue eyes, empower her to act on her own behalf, but her madness protects her from witnessing too much, from internalizing any further her

loveless existence. Her personalities split, but there is a very real voice that reminds her of the ugliness of her past—particularly her father who is now dead. It is for this reason that by the end of the book Pecola needs the "bluest eyes."

## CONCLUSION

The Vienna Tribunal, part of the United Nations Decade of Women, was filmed and produced by Women Make Movies. In the film, one by one women from around the world speak their pain and share with a listening (and hopefully) humane world the horrific violations of human rights committed against them by men and as a result of systems of domination operating in their various homeplaces. Moved to tears, even as I think about the film, I wonder what my own story would look like on film—what African women's stories would look like. I wonder what would happen if we came together under one roof, for one purpose—to confront our victimizers, our oppressors, to hand over to them a verbal list of their offenses accompanied by a description of the unspeakable violence and mutilation done to our psyches as well as our bodies.

This project has been my attempt to make our stories real for those who cannot believe that race, gender, and class politics are very much a part of our psychological makeup. Though I use literature to make this point, we cannot ignore the age-old declaration that literature is a



reflection of life. Africana women's texts reflect the life, the situations, the circumstances, the joys, the triumphs, the agony, the pain we live. It is much easier to swallow the story when it is cast as fiction; for the world would still be trembling with horror and shame, lined up for the "sackcloth and ashes" Jamaica Kincaid believes our oppressors would wear in penance if they came into full confrontation with their offenses.

A project such as this raises more questions than it answers. I hope this is considered a good thing. I did not plan to supply all the answers or to explain Africana women to individuals who do not understand us, but to begin a sustained and fruitful discussion of Africana women's literary madness and the kinds of real-life conditions that produce it.

I imagine that even now, after having read this project, many might be a little more than hesitant in accepting my claim that in Africana women's texts madness is empowering. I expect this: When one operates from privileged positions, from positions of power, it is difficult to see the subversive ways in which madness operates, and difficult to comprehend that empowerment is not always attached to gaining some obvious victory over oppressors, or even about *remaining* in a state of

empowerment. Sometimes, as the literature illustrates, empowerment means to grasp that one moment of control and use it for one's advantage. For Nellie and Elizabeth, madness shelters them while empowering them to come to fuller, more realistic understanding of their sexuality and their cultural affiliations. For Tashi, Juletane, and Eva, madness—no matter how temporary—allows them the space to act against cultural and sexual oppression. For Lucy and Nyasha, madness, gives the space to vent, to hash out, to work through ambiguities and discrepancies in their homeplaces.

Though I could not possibly discuss every aspect of Africana women's madness in this project, I look forward to taking this project further, particularly, to explore the links between dreams and sleep and madness. For in many African and Caribbean women's texts, the women's madness takes shape in dreams, and it is visions or dreams that propel them to act in or on madness. I would also like to explore spirit possession as a form of madness. Rebeka Njau's Selina is lulled into her murderous acts by a "ripple in the pool."

At times, it seems I am serving as an advocate for the characters discussed, justifying their actions and seeking to render them guiltless in their own undoing. This

possibly comes out of my own recognition that Black women have often been presumed guilty and even hostile, even when circumstances warrant it. In fact, I thought the "hostility" accusation had generally gone by the wayside in critical circles until less than a week ago, when I looked over the teacher's aids for a new anthology that described Black feminism as "antagonistic" and "hostile" to white women's feminism. Perhaps, my advocacy (tone) also comes out of an unconscious need to justify my own anger, my own madness, myself.

I am satisfied that I have not met a Black woman—formally educated or educated otherwise—who has not said "Amen, Sister" (or some variant) when I talk to them about my project. While on certain levels I write this project for a degree, on a personal level, I also write it for my Sisters. I seek and value their validation as well.

Aché!

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I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.



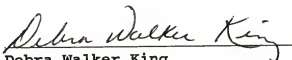
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